

Clash of Titans

by darkjedi908

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Summary: TV's most iconic monsters, the Xenomorph and the Predator, battle humanity's last hope SPARTAN 117, the Master Chief! Begins at the end of Halo 2's cliffhanger. MAJOR SPOILERS! CH X!: The Spartans haven't given up yet...

1. Capture

****Disclaimer; ****As much as I wish I owned Halo and all of it's affiliates, I don't. So don't sue me.

Author's Note; Yeah, yet another Halo 2 ending story. And I know it is probably absolute crap- don't flame me! Please, review, but, no flames!

****CHAPTER I****

****Capture****

"With all due respect, what the hell are you doing aboard that ship?"

"Sir. Finishing this fight"

Spartan 117, otherwise known as the Master Chief, signed off the COM. Standing up and brushing the dust off his body, he looked around him.

The Chief had managed to board a ship designed by a race known as the Forerunners. The head of the Covenant hierarchy, the Prophet of Truth, was currently piloting the ship. The Master Chief had to find him; this Prophet possessed an ancient relic called the Index, from an even older artifact called Halo, a large ring world floating in space.

>Halo was a weapon; the Index was it's firing key. Halo, if activated, would destroy all sentient life in the galaxy, like it had done before, sometime in the ancient past.<p>

The Chief spotted a small hatch in the wall to his left. Having lost all of his weapons on his desperate rush for the ship, the Chief was unarmed, except for one plasma grenade, which was attached to his belt. Cautiously opening the door, the Chief peered inside.

Nothing. The halls were empty. Checking for the telltale shimmer that would signal the presence of cloaked Covenant Elites, the Chief cautiously walked down the hallway, the grenade in his hand. The handy property of plasma grenades was the fact that they, upon making contact with organic flesh, would stick to it fiercely until the grenade exploded. This was a major advantage over the normal human fragmentation grenades.

A Covenant Jackal came skidding around the corner. The Chief leaped into the air, and landed with both feet on the unsuspecting Jackal's head. The Jackal's eyes widened in horror before it was squished beneath the Chief's huge armored boots.

Picking up the Jackal's weapon, a Covenant Plasma Pistol, the Chief turned around the corner, fully expecting an entire platoon of Covenant infantry to be waiting for him. Nothing.

The Jackal must have been on patrol; there was nothing down here. Nothing visible, anyway. The Chief wondered where everyone was; this ship had supposedly evacuated all remaining troops loyal to the Prophet of Truth; where were they? These thoughts raced through the Chief's confused mind as he wandered the halls of the massive ship. He had to find Truth and take him down, then somehow find a way to help Earth's forces defend against the Covenant fleet attacking Earth.

A rustling noise behind the Chief startled him, and he whirled around, weapon at the ready. Nothing. The hall was empty; devoid of anything, even the telltale shimmer of Covenant warriors in Active Camouflage.

The Chief was confused. So far, having wandered through two decks, he had only run into one jackal. What was wrong here?

The answer came as the Chief stepped into a large, circular room. It had many doors and a very high ceiling. At first, it was dark, but as the Chief entered the center of the room, the lights snapped on. Almost awed at what he saw, the Chief walked up to the center of the room.

There were three caskets in the center of the room. Tall and imposing, they shone with polished metal. They were made of the grey metal of the Forerunner ship, so the Chief couldn't figure out what was inside.

Maybe a bomb? Maybe just an arms cache? What is in there?

"Halt, Demon," called a low voice from across the room. Turning, the Chief almost gasped as every door in the room opened up at once. Covenant Brutes and Jackals poured into the room, weapons poised.

"Surrender, Demon. There is nowhere to go" said a Brute with grey armor. It hefted its plasma rifle, before the Prophet of Truth

himself floated into the room on his hover-chair.

"Youâ€|you destroyed the sacred ring, killed my brother, and let the Flood escape onto our sacred city, High Charity. For this, you must die, Demon" the Prophet said, lifting his finger casually. The Chief pointed the Needler at him.

"If I'm going to die, you're going to hell with me, buddy" the Chief said. The Prophet seemed unfazed.

"I know I am going to die; there is no need for that. For when the Great Journey begins, I will die; it has been foreseen. Tartarus, Chieftain of the Brutes, has the Index. He will activate the sacred ring, and the Great Journey shall begin!"

The Chief was horrified. Now it was certain; the Chief knew he would never see Cortana, Johnson, or Keyes again; Cortana would take them all down before letting Delta Halo fire it's weapon. Snarling, the Chief sprung at the Prophet. Before the hordes could fire a shot, the Chief was on top of the Prophet's chair, Needler pressed against the Prophet's forehead. The Prophet glared at the Chief, until his eyes widened in terror. They were looking over the Chief's shoulder. At first believing this was a bluff to draw his attention elsewhere, the Chief pressed the Needler in harder. Until he saw the Prophet's, and the entire Covenant Force's attention, however, was focused behind him, the Chief turned to look.

A low hissing noise was coming from the caskets. Steam began to shoot out from the sides of the casket. It looked like they were beginning to open up. The Chief stared, transfixed by this event. Something wonderful and terrible was about to happen, and the entire regiment in the room could sense it. The Brute's hands tightened on their Plasma Rifles and grenade launchers; the jackals snapped on their energy shields and snarled, preparing for what might be their last battle.

And the casket opened. A brilliant, blinding light emanated from the open caskets. The Prophet and his forces shielded their eyes; the Chief's visor was able to dim, to block out the light of the casket. A dark shape stirred inside.

Snarling in fear, a Jackal fired a barrage of shots into the casket. But the dark shape was impossibly fast; it moved with fluidity and grace that even John could not match. It was almostâ€|demonic, the way this new entity moved.

The Jackal that had fired the shots only had time to scream in terror before it's head was impaled on a set of long, sharp looking wrist blades.

A Brute screamed in rage and fired his grenade launcher. The creature, whatever it was, deflected and dodged the explosive projectiles, bouncing them across the room, exploding on the ceiling, over the heads of the Brutes and Jackals, or even close to the Chief's head. The Chief knocked the Prophet down; he had to bring the Prophet back to Earth. The capture of a member of the Covenant hierarchy would hopefully force a truce, or even surrender of the Covenant forces; Truth had to make it off the ring alive.

Two more shapes like the first emerged from their respective caskets.

One had an odd sort of shoulder-mounted cannon, with a laser sight. It also held an odd disc-shaped object. It turned to a group of Jackals and threw the disc. It flew like a boomerang and decapitated the group of Jackals that did not take cover. The shoulder cannon focused its laser sight on a Brute's head, and fired. The Brute disintegrated in a brilliant flash of light.

The other warrior had a long spear-like weapon of sorts. Truly deadly looking, its first victim was an unfortunate Jackal who didn't raise his energy shield in time. The spear punched through the Jackal's abdomen, spraying purple blood in all directions. And as efficiently as it had gone in, the spear was yanked out of the Jackal's body, leaving it to slump, dead, to the ground.

Boiling plasma and grenades filled the air as these demons attacked. The Prophet gasped in horror as a severed hand landed next to his face. The Chief, knowing he might be next on their target list, grabbed the Prophet from its chair, threw it over his shoulder, and ran for an exit.

Fleeing the dying screams and explosions of that slaughter hall, the Chief knew he had to get off the ship, somehow. Find a Banshee, Phantom, whatever; just get himself and the Prophet off the ship.

The Chief heard footsteps behind him. Apparently, the Covenant didn't take too kindly to their leader being abducted. As the Chief turned around and prepared to fight, he recoiled in surprise as one of the demons came around the corner to face him, activating its laser cannon and aiming it dead-center of the Chief's helmet.

The Chief, thinking quickly, shoved the Prophet behind him, and jumped sideways. The ball of energy flew down the hallways, harmless. The Chief fired the Needler at the demon.

Instead of embedding themselves in the victim's body and exploding, like they were supposed to, the needles harmlessly bounced off of the creature's chest and head. Growling, the Chief pulled out the plasma pistol and fired. The demon dodged the boiling plasma balls and continued to advance.

The shoulder cannon retracted into the demon's armor. Instead, it unsheathed its long, deadly looking wrist blades. They slid into place with a menacing _shling_!

Knowing those weapons could probably tear him in two, the Chief, once again, picked up the Prophet and ran, pausing only to fire a burst of shots at the demon. It would quickly dodge and keep up the chase.

"Aahhh! Aahh!" the Prophet screamed as he saw the demon round the corner. Two Brutes stepped out to fight the creature; but to no avail. One Brute was impaled on the long wrist blades, the other dispatched with a swift kick to the head. The Demon continued its chase. Desperate, the Chief remembered the plasma grenade at his belt. He threw it, and the blue fizzy grenade arced through the air and landed square in the middle of the Demon's helmet.

The Chief only heard the explosion; assuming the demon, whatever it was, was dead, the Chief boarded a Phantom drop ship. Outside, a

Banshee exploded as Brute shot grenades bounced off the Phantom's armor, creating loud, pounding noises that startled the Prophet, and made it's head swivel in terror. The pounding continued as the Chief opened the hangar doors. The wrecked Banshee was sucked out of the airlock doors as the Phantom roared out of the hangar. The Chief, tuning the ship's broadcasting systems to the UNSC band, quickly hailed;

"This is SPARTAN 117. I have the Prophet of Truth and am requesting an escort"

The curt voice of Admiral Hood replied;

"Roger that. I'm redirecting a few Longswords to your position; they will be there shortly"

And sure enough, as soon as the Chief had exited the Covenant region of space, three Longsword fighters flew around the Phantom and escorted it towards a larger ship, a Halycron Class Cruiser. The nameplate on the side read "Column of Solstice".

The Chief remembered the last time he had been aboard a Halycron class cruiser; it had been called the Pillar of Autumn, and he was aboard it to destroy it, to prevent a deadly parasite, the Flood, from spreading, the Master Chief and Cortana, an AI designed for military use, had detonated the Autumn's engines, ending the threat of the Flood once and for all.

Or so it had seemed. The Chief's recent masquerade on Delta Halo had re-awakened the Flood once again, and once again, the Chief and Cortana had managed to destroy them; at a price. The Chief had had to leave Cortana behind; Cortana's sacrifice meant the safety of Earth.

Remembering his last moments on Delta Halo, the Chief stared off into space, and rememberedâ€¦|

The Chief sprinted down the hallway. The weight of his weapon, a Covenant Fuel Rod Cannon, slowed him down somewhat, but it was needed in the battle ahead.

Ahead, Brutes and Flood combat forms duked it out. Cortana's surprised voice called;

"_Chief! That Forerunner ship is disconnecting it's power core from High Charity! You have to hurry! I can't stall the launch sequence anymore!"_

The Chief took a knee and fired his Fuel Rod Cannon. All five shots landed in the midst of the enemy, scattering bodies everywhere. Sprinting towards a hololift, the Chief hopped onboard, just as the ship began to take off. He was blasted into the ship's open engine core. The Fuel Rod Cannon was out of Fuel Rods, and the Shotgun on the Chief's back snapped in two like a cheap piece of plastic as the Chief skidded to a halt inside the ship.

"_Cortana. When I'm done with Truthâ€¦|" the Chief began, but Cortana cut him off._

"_Don't make a girl a promiseâ€¦|if you know you can't keep it,

Chief"._

Getting up and looking around, the Chief noticed that the Prophet was sitting in a corner silently. As the Chief approached to lower the doors, he said

"There is nothing you can do. Tartarus has the Index. The Great Journey will begin," he mumbled as the hatch hissed open.

The Chief, with the Prophet following him, stepped out into the ship. A marine, with a shotgun in his arms, walked up to the Chief and raised the firearm.

"What-"

The Chief never finished. The Marine fired.

2. Uncertain Alliances

****Author's Note:**** Ok, thank you everyone who reviewed my first chapter! You've all inspired me to write more; don't worry, Master and Chief; I understand the Preds.aren't invincible. The Chief will fight one in the next chapter. Obsidian13; yea, I kinda figured I wasn't the first. Raven-Marss2000-I agree; the Chief vs. both Aliens andPreds is good idea, and a fun one! Jango19999- thanks! I'm glad you think so. And Crow T R0bot- I understand it was a bit rushed. I will revise that later.

Ok- on to Chapter 2!

****Chapter II:****

****Uncertain Alliances****

"Quiet, Tinkerbell!"

The Arbiter was surprised at how callous thisâ€¦human was in front of the holy Oracle. His fellow warriors, the _Sanghelli,_ or "Elites", as the humans called them, dared not even speak in the presence of a holy Oracle, much less insult one.

"Johnson, watch it," called the other, smaller human. "Where would one go to activate the rings?" it asked.

The oracle, which called itself 343 Guilty Spark, replied, as if it was an obvious question,

"Why, the Arc, of course".

The Arbiter stepped forward. For centuries, Arbiters had served the Covenant in times of extreme crisis. And every time, the Arbiter had somehow died a quick, swift death. Missions the Arbiters undertook were usually suicidal or insane; the most notable feats the Arbiters of the past had accomplished were the Taming of the Hunters, and the failed Grunt Rebellion, only thirty five units ago. This Arbiter, the former commander-in-chief of the Covenant Armada, who had become the Arbiter after his disgrace, stood tall and proud, the arrogance of a former Zealot still shining through his eyes. He stepped forward asked;

"And where, Oracle, is that?"

"Hmm. Give me a moment to study Installation 05's data banks". There was a long pause, before the construct answered, "I am sorry. Despite my best efforts, there is no mention of the Arc in Installation 05's database. Installation 04 was the primary data housing center of the Installations; Installation 05 was the-"

"Just tell us where to go to find this 'Arc'" the small human said.

"Very well. We could go to the remains of Installation 04; if the primary data archives are still relatively intact, we can search through them to find the Arc's location" 343 Guilty Spark chirped.

"Alright, then. I'll signal a Phantom to pick us up outside. Carry those who cannot walk; we're going now" the Arbiter growled. An Elite Zealot, whose legs were torn off, thanks to Tartarus' Gravity Hammer, had to be hoisted between two other Spec Ops Elites. Together, the humans and Elites walked outside into the crisp air outside the Control Center. 343 Guilty Spark hovered behind them.

"I have contacted the Monitor of Installation 05. He will oversee the manual override of this installation while we go to Installation 04" it said. The Arbiter nodded at the creature as a Covenant Spectre pulled up next to the group. An Elite wearing white armor dismounted; this was Solarnee' Putantee, the Spec Ops Elite commander. Bits of armor were missing, small holes blasted in different places in his armor. Purple blood splattered his formerly pristine armor; but he still had his traditional Energy Sword clipped to his side.

"By the Gods! Arbiter, did you defeat Tartarus? And what are they doing with you?" Solarnee' asked, looking at the humans.

"We joined forces to defeat Tartarus. We will form an effective peace treaty, I suppose, before our Phantom arrives. How many of our forces survived the battle between the Jiralhanae?" the Arbiter asked.

"Many of our best warriors fell to the Jiralhanae. Those brutes. Two of our best warriors," Solarnee' began, gesturing towards the occupants of the Spectre, "survived the battle. A pair of Lekgolo and half a platoon of Unggoy are waiting on the cliff top. We managed to salvage this and another Spectre, three Ghosts, two Banshees, and one Wraith mortar tank" Solarnee growled.

The Arbiter was shocked. This was a huge loss; this area was the last concentration of Covenant Forces in the area, and from battling the Flood and each other, the majority of these forces had been decimated.

"I have signaled a Phantom. It is coming to pick us up. Can you hail a ship?" The Arbiter asked Solarnee'.

"Already done, Arbiter. The Pious Inquisitioner is orbiting our position, waiting for our Phantoms" Solarnee said.

A loud roaring noise suddenly came from beyond the cliffs. The

Arbiter and Solarnee' tensed, knowing the sound instantly of that of a human Warthog.

"Human vehicles! More allies to join our cause" the Arbiter muttered as the three Warthogs rounded the bend, followed by a human dropship. A large tank, called by the humans a "Scorpion", hung from the back of the dropship.

"Halt! In the name of the UNSC!" the lead marine called.

"Hold your fire, Stacker! We've made a temporary alliance with the Covenant! Hold your fire!" the small human called.

"Ma'am? Are you sure these Covenant bastards," the marine called, gesturing towards the Arbiter with a flick of his rifle, "didn't brainwash you?"

The other marine stepped forward.

"What you got, a corn cob in your ear, son? These Elites saved us from the leader of the Brutes, and you have a mind to kill them? Hell no, boy!" the other marine yelled.

Another Spectre hovered up. It was driven by one Elite, but to the Arbiter's surprise, two humans rode on the flanks of the vehicle, while an Elite Councilor rode on the back gun.

The Arbiter recognized the Marines; these were the Marines he had saved from execution by the Jiralhanae. Apparently, the peace treaty had spread quickly.

"Whoa! Mira, look! It's him! That Elite that made the deal with Johnson!" one marine yelled as he dismounted, pointing at the Arbiter.

The Human dropship had landed; several of its occupants leapt out. They wore black suits with helmets; the Arbiter recognized them as human OSDT's, or "Helljumpers". These were formidable fighters; incredibly tough, and specially trained. The only human fighters who could best them in the field of combat were the human "SPARTANS". But they were supposedly all dead, except for one, the Demon who destroyed Installation 04.

"Johnson! Keyes! Are we glad to see you! We thought everyone aboard In Amber Clad was lost!" one human pilot called.

"Whatcha got there, marine?" the one human asked.

"Sir! We were hauling this tank, and some more heavy weapons when In Amber Clad was attacked by the flood. We quick gathered what we could and took off! Three more Pelicans made it off, carrying their Warthogs. They're back a ways, hidden from the Flood. Sir, would you mind telling me why you are with theseâ€¦aliens?" the pilot asked, looking at the Arbiter with a mixture of distaste and fear. The Arbiter merely looked back at the human; it glared at him.

"These here Elites are our allies, now. Their Prophets have supposedly lied to them; them and the Hunters and Grunts have left the Covenant to fight with us" Keyes said.

"Well, then. That puts things in perspective. Any word on the Master Chief?" the pilot asked.

"None yet. We lost contact after he supposedly took down the Prophet of Regret" Keyes answered.

The Phantom arrived; it hovered meters above the ground, the gravity lift humming with energy.

"Arbiter? By the Gods! Don't worry; we know of the alliance between the humans. Get aboard; the Pious Inquisitioner is preparing to transition back home" the voice of an Elite said. The Arbiter shook his head.

"No. We're not going home. Not yet. Set coordinates for the holy ring" he said.

"But we're right-wait, the first ring? Why, Arbiter? There's nothing there but destroyed rubble and remnants!" the Elite called.

"I'll explain on the way. Let's just go!"

The Human warthogs took off, obviously heading for their Pelicans. After fifteen units, the three Pelicans appeared on the horizon. The four Pelicans and the Phantom took off, streaking towards the sky.

Above, the Covenant Armada was slowly tearing itself apart. Jiralhanae and Sanghelli controlled ships fought for dominance in the skies above.

A blinding flash of light erupted from the remains of the Covenant city, High Charity. On closer inspection, it was a ship! A large ship, it was surprisingly fast; in a blink of an eye, it disappeared into Slipspace.

The Arbiter relaxed into his crash seat and peered out one of the observation ports. The Pious Inquisitioner, an older, smaller cruiser, awaited above; dozens of Seraph fighters patrolling around it.

"We'll be entering the hangar shortly" the pilot said.

"Give me a line to the commander. I must speak to him" the Arbiter said.

The commander of the Pious Inquisitioner was the Arbiter's former student, an Elite Zealot by the name of Poturmee' Zangazee. He was second in command by the time the first holy ring was destroyed; he had taken over command of the grand Armada after the Arbiter's disgrace.

"Arbiter? Is that you?" came Poturmee's voice.

"Yes. It is I. Are we ready to jump?"

"As soon as you and your allies are onboard" he replied.

"Get ready to jump. Delegate command to the Faith and Hope, and prepare for a Slipspace jump!" the Arbiter said.

A light beeped on the intercom; it was a transmission from High Charity! The Arbiter hit the intercom button and listened. A warm human voice flowed into the cockpit;

"Miranda? Johnson? Is that you aboard that Phantom?"

At the sound of their names, the two humans perked up.

"Cortana? Where are you? Is the Chief with you? We could sure use his help right now!" Keyes said.

"No. He boarded the Prophet of Truth's vessel. It's headed to Earth as we speak. Quickly, get over here now, and get me out of here!"

"Where are you? In High Charity?" it asked again.

"Yes. I'm in the main council chamber; perhaps one of your Elites can get in and rescue me" Cortana said.

"It's your call, Arbiter. Should we go get her, or come back later?" Keyes asked the Arbiter. The Arbiter paused, and finally replied;

"As you wish. Pilot! Set course for High Charity!"

The Phantom wheeled and turned in the opposite direction. Broadcasting orders to the Pelicans to keep going, and for the Pious Inquisitioner to wait, the Phantom zoomed towards High Charity.

After a unit's worth of travel, the pilot announced that they had arrived. The Arbiter stood quickly and moved towards the exit.

"I will retrieve your construct. Wait here. If I do not return, proceed without me" the Arbiter said, hopping out of the gravity lift. Watching him descend, Johnson saw the Elite snap on an energy sword and rush into High Charity.

"He'll make it. He's one tough son of a bitch" Johnson said softly, watching the Elite go.

"I hope so" Keyes replied as the doors shut behind the Elite.

3. Wrestling Match

Author's Note: Ok, now time for MC vs. a Predator! YAY! This chapter will dispel the illusion I put in my first one; Preds aren't invincible. Though, if anyone's watched the Predator movies, they sure seem like it. I've only seen Predator 2: the main character had to kill the Predator with it's own weapon to defeat it. Special forces teams, automatic rifles, and Bill Paxton couldn't defeat it. Soâ€¦yea. Xenos won't come until we get a little past Installation 04's remains; they'll be there. Everything will come together, don't worry! Thank you, all of you who have reviewed my story thus far!

Wrestling Match

The Marine raised his shotgun and fired.

The Master Chief flinched, preparing for death; his shields couldn't possibly take the shell point-blank range!

A low, gurgling, almost cackle emitted from behind the Chief. The Prophet wheeled around and screamed before he was decapitated.

NO! Without the Prophet, we will lose this war!

A shimmer in the air crouched low over the dead Prophet's body. The Marine fired shot after shot at the creature. Small bits of green ichor splattered the deck around it.

Three small pinpoints of light appeared right in the center of the Marine's chest. The Chief only watched in horror as what looked like a signal flare shot from the shimmer and lodged itself in the Marine's chest. The Marine was torn apart instantly; the explosion threw the rest of the Marine escorts to the ground.

The Chief jumped sideways, landing in a low crouch next to the fallen Marine's shotgun. Lifting the weapon, he unloaded shell after shell into the strange shimmer.

There was the sound of metal striking metal as the shells impacted the shimmer. Something was there to absorb the shells, and whatever it was, it was tough, because the shotgun shells did not seem to affect it at all.

And suddenly, with a crackle of electric circuits going dead, the Demon from the Forerunner ship appeared where the odd shimmer was.

Cloaking technology!

The Chief raised the shotgun; one of the shells must have scored a lucky hit against the thing's camouflauge generator. Pulling the trigger, he was dismayed when the shotgun cycled empty. Dropping the spent weapon, the Chief desperately searched for a weapon. Anything.

The creature's cannon fired again; a blinding flash of light struck the Chief in the chest. His shields read completely drained, the low, insistant beeping told him that much. The creature chuckled at the fallen Chief, and pulled out a small rod from it's belt. As soon as it cleared the thing's belt, it extended into a long, deadly looking spear-like weapon.

Slowly getting to his feet as his shields recharged, the Chief once again scanned his surroundings for a weapon. Anything. He needed a stand off weapon; the spear looked deadly, and the Chief knew what the wristblades of that creature could do.

Two marines were struggling to stand; the other three were knocked unconscious on the deck. One raised her Battle Rifle and fired a trio of shots into the creature's helmet, which simply bounced off. The creature turned towards the marine, and charged, with surprising

speed, the spear raised high. The other Marine fired his archaic M5AB Assault Rifle in vain; the creature just continued it's angry charge.

Waiting for just the right moment, the Chief prepared to spring. As soon as the Demon was two steps away from impaling the Marine, the Chief tackled the creature, sending it toppling sideways. The spear rolled off to the side and out of their reach.

The Chief was on top of the creature; he raised an iron fist and began to slug the creature in the face. As his fist came around for a second punch, the creature blocked the Chief's attack, and slowly began to reverse the grip. The Chief struggled to regain dominance, but it was no use. The Demon was just too strong.

The Chief and the Demon continued to struggle, wrestling each other. Lieutenant Anna Cameron aimed her Battle Rifle at the creature, but could not hit it without hitting the Chief. It was no use anyway; her first shots had been dead on, right in the Demon's face, but it had kept coming at her, until the Chief tackled it. Anna snarled; this thing, whatever the hell it was, was going down. She fingered a grenade at her belt in agitation; she couldn't use it without hurting the Chief.

"Chief! Get clear, sir!" she yelled. Unfortunately, the Demon seemed to be overpowering the Chief, and he couldn't disengage; the creature was almost on top of him now.

It was now or never. Dropping the rifle, Anna sprinted forwards, yelling a primeval battle roar. The creature, who had extended what looked like a long, painful set of wristblades, looked up in surprise as Anna leapt into the air.

Remembering her self-defense training, Anna chambered her leg high, and as the thing began to try and evade her, she jump kicked it in the head. It toppled off the Chief, momentarily stunned.

And that was enough. The Chief, knowing what Anna planned to do, rolled out of the way. She primed the grenade at her belt and clipped it to the creature's belt. She grinned an insane grin as the creature tried to rid itself of the grenade before she jumped out of the way.

The grenade exploded. The Chief jumped to his feet, preparing to fight. The other marine, Corporal Robert Hanks, held his archaic M5AB Assault Rifle high, aiming at the fallen Demon.

The Chief had appropriated Anna's discarded Battle Rifle, and was walking up to the creature. It's body smoked, and green blood pooled around it's body. Anna drew her pistol and approached the creature.

A metal facemask adorned it's face. It appeared to be resistant to most attacks, though three scratchmarks and a large dent showed it wasn't invulnerable to attack. Curious as to why this thing wore a face mask, Anna lowered her pistol and reached for the creature's helmet. Grasping it, she began to tug at it. A low hiss, almost like steam, resounded as the mask came off. Anna was instantly reminded of an archaic movie her father had once shown her when she was a child; it had been a hit 500 years ago. The movie had been called Star Wars,

and the unmasking of this creature reminded her of the scene where Luke Skywalker had unmasked Darth Vader, to reveal the scarred man underneath.

This was even worse. The creature underneath the mask reminded her somewhat of a cross between the pictures of the Flood the Chief had recovered from the first Halo, and a Covenant Elite; it had four mandibles, like the Elites, and it's skin was a tan color, like the Flood. It's eyes were shut, and a large, green bruise on the side of the face showed where the Chief had punched it.

"Wow. You are one ugly mo-" Hanks began, before his head exploded. The creature's shoulder cannon had fired; it had targeted Hanks and blew his head off. As Anna began to raise her pistol, a huge, stabbing pain filled her gut; looking down, she saw one of the creature's wristblades embedded in her gut. Her face turned white as she fainted.

The Master Chief backed up. This thing had dispatched the two Marines in a blink of an eye; it was stronger and faster than he was, too. The female Marine was tossed aside, still breathing, as the thing stood up and glared at the Chief.

"Shit happens" it growled in perfect English. Even though it's helmet was gone and the targeting system of the cannon was useless, it could still manually be fired. The Chief sidestepped one of the odd flares as it shot by his head. He fired the Battle Rifle in vain; the shots hit the creature square in the chest, but it didn't hurt it at all.

The rifle cycled empty. The Chief was running out of options; weapons didn't seem to affect it, and this thing could easily overpower him in a wrestling match.

Unless the Chief spotted the Demon's fallen spear, laying where it had fallen after he tackled it. Lunging sideways, the Chief began to sprint after the spear, knowing full well the creature probably had one more trick up it's sleeve.

And it did. A whistling noise sounded behind the Chief; he quickly hit the dirt. A large, disc like object flew past his head and embedded itself in the wall of the hangar. It glowed with a strange light; it looked very ominous, pulsating and glowing with an eerie light.

The Chief snatched up the spear. Turning, he realized the creature was almost on top of him. It lunged forwards, preparing to strike with it's deadly wristblades

And was met with the tip of it's own spear. The Chief rammed the head of the spear right through the Demon's midsection. Green blood spurted out of the wound; the Demon screamed, a gurgling, death howl, before slumping to the ground, dead.

Dropping the spear just as another Marine reaction team descended from a lift in the back of the hangar, a Marine wielding a new, prototype flamethrower stepped forward. The Chief recognized him as Sergeant Stacker; his brother was on the Pillar of Autumn when it went down over Halo. Stacker did not blame the Chief for his brother's demise, however; in fact, he admired the Chief for

surviving what his brother could not. He stepped up to the Chief and peered down at the fallen Demon with a mix of confusion and disgust.

"If you don't mind me askin' Chiefâ€¦what the hell is that thing?"

The Chief paused, unsure of what to say. Behind him, two other marines hoisted the wounded marine onto a stretcher. She managed to weakly salute the Chief and Stacker as the two marines carried her into the lift.

"I don't know. When I was aboard the Forerunner ship, three of these Demons came out of three caskets. They attacked and dispatched many of the Covenant's best warriorsâ€¦including the Prophet of Truth" the Chief began, gesturing towards the Prophet's dead body.

"Wait, Chief. There'sâ€¦two more of these things?" he asked.

"There might even be more beyond that" the Chief replied gravely.

"Well, when it comes, we'll watch your back. Just like good old times, Chief" said a voice. The Chief wheeled; four other SPARTANS had appeared behind the other Marines. The Master Chief recognized them as Fred, Will, Linda, and to his surprise, Kelly, who had disappeared months before with the SPARTAN project's leader; Dr. Halsey.

"Kelly! You're alive! Is Dr. Halseyâ€¦?" the Chief asked. Kelly nodded.

"Yes. I don't remember much; talk to her for details. Everything is fuzzy; I don't remember much" she said honestly. She carried two human Magnums; Linda her customized sniper rifle, Fred a Battle Rifle, and Will an SMG and a Rocket Launcher slung over his back.

"The crew's all here" the Chief said.

"Except for us!"

Two more SPARTANS appeared; the Chief barely recognized them.

"John 117. You don't remember us? We were stationed on distant planets for many years; we only just arrived" said the lead SPARTAN. He carried a human M6D HE pistol at his belt, and a plasma pistol alongside it. The other SPARTAN had a pair of SMG's slung across her hips.

"I doubt you remember us; we were united with our MJLONIR armor away from Reach. I'm SPARTAN â€"049, Rebecca, and this is SPARTAN â€"153, Luke" she said. The Master Chief shook both their hands, and they began to walk towards the lift, while the Marines puzzled over the dead body of the creature.

"Dr. Halsey wants to see you, Chief. She says she has something to show you" Kelly said as the SPARTANS boarded the elevator. The Chief hit the "Ascend" button, and the lift doors closed and the lift whooshed upwards.

4. A New Adversary

Author's Note: Ok, scratch my Author's Note for Chapter 3: I WILL show a Xenomorph in High Charity; Master and Chief inspired me to write it so. So, without further ado, here is CHAPTER IV (dum dum dum!)

Chapter IV:

Searching and Pondering

The Arbiter dismounted the Phantom and activated his Energy Sword; knowing full well what this weapon could do to the Flood, he sprinted towards High Charity's large doors. Recognising the platform he was on as the same platform where Tartarus had branded him with the Mark of Shame, the worst punishment a warrior could receive.

"_You've drawn quite a crowd" Tartarus mocked as the Arbiter, then known as Ingau' Fosolnee, leader of the grand Covenant Armada._

"_If they came to hear me beg, they will be disappointed" the Arbiter replied tersely, knowing full well what was about to happen; he had seen this ceremony many times before._

"_Are you sure?" Tartarus asked mockingly as the torture rings activated. A burning pain shot through the Arbiter's arms, and into his body; he opened his mandibles and screamed._

After his once-pristine gold armor had been reduced to a smouldering pile of ash, Tartarus brought out the seal that contained the Mark of Shame. He heated the tip, and when he was satisfied that it was hot enough to leave a mark, he applied it to the Arbiter's chest.

It was not so much the pain than the humiliation that the Arbiter screamed from. He reared back and let out a long, pained roar.

The Arbiter twitched his lower mandibles at the memory; no time for old memories now. According to data picked up from the Phantom, the Construct's data chip was inside the council chambers, not too far from this platform. All the Arbiter had to do was fight through the Flood and retrieve this disk. Simple enough.

Until the Arbiter charged through the doors and rounded the corner. Hordes and hordes of Flood Combat forms rushed forward to attack the Arbiter; the Arbiter stopped for only a moment, in awe of all of the Flood here, and charged into the fray. Priming a Plasma Grenade from his belt, he quickly stuck the device to a combat form in the rear of the group. The grenade exploded, taking down about a sixth of the entire group. More and more Combat forms joined the fray, sacrificing themselves for more of their brethren to join the melee.

The Arbiter was dismayed as his Energy Sword suddenly went limp in his arms; it was out of energy. Clipping the weapon back onto his belt, the Arbiter drew his backup weapon; a human Shotgun. He had acquired it from a Jiralhanae stronghold on Delta Halo; he had found it surprisingly effective against Sanghelli combat forms.

And it proved itself very effective. Using two human "frag" grenades

also found in the stronghold, the Arbiter eventually stood victorious, covered in Flood goop, in the midst of many dead Combat forms. Inserting a new energy crystal into his Energy sword and reloading his human shotgun, the Arbiter rushed into the Council Chambers, and was dismayed at what he saw.

He recognized the creature that now resided in the main Council Chamber; it was a massive Flood brain form. It had taken the body of the Prophet of Regret, the Oracle of this Halo, and the human Demon hostage; it had used both the Arbiter and the Demon to prevent Tartarus from activating the ring. The Arbiter had no idea where the creature had sent the Demon; he had sent the Arbiter to stop Tartarus.

And a small holopanel glowed; a blue human construct glowed.

"Silence fills the empty grave, now that they are gone. But questions linger on, unanswered. Now I will talk, and you will answer" it said, drawing it's tentacles closer to the construct. It raised a semitransparent hand and said;

"Ok. Shoot".

The Arbiter couldn't help but become intrigued at this new turn of events. Just as the creature began to speak, alarms began to blare throughout High Charity.

"Fools! The Holy Warriors shall smite your very exsistance! Heretics! Die!" came the voice of the AI of High Charity; Noblilty and Truth, as it was known by the Sanghelli.

The Arbiter was puzzled; the Holy Warriors were nothing more but myth and speculation. They didn't exist; they had disappeared with the Forerunners. Or had they? Maybe the Prophets had found them units ago, and had hidden them from the normal Covenant Soldiers.

Recalling everything he could about the Holy Warriors, the Arbiter concentrated, hidden in his dark corner;

The Arbiter, a young Sanghelli at the time, sat at his holo-seat. An older Sanghelli councilor stood in front of him, lecturing his fellow Sanghelli on the writings of the Forerunners.

"_And on this, we have evidence of what we know as the 'Holy Warriors'. They were supposedly unstoppable; even more powerful than the mighty Lekgolo" he said, with a snort of distain._

"_Their offspring were contained in the Holy birth givers, for no better word now, and if you were worthy, they would pick you to give birth to their offspring. The divinity of these offspring, however, was so great that the parent perished giving birth. Once fully matured, the Holy Warriors were pure black, to show their divinity. Their mere glares alone were enough to make the strongest enemies of our lords quake in fear. They contained the spiteful essence of the gods, which would destroy anything that was able to harm them" the Elite Councilor began, before the tone sounded for break._

At the time, the Arbiter had dismissed the lecture as mere religious

fanaticism. Now, however, he was not so convinced. A loud hissing noise emanated from deep within High Charity. The Arbiter had had enough; he activated his Active Camouflage and rushed forwards, snatching up the data chip from the pedestal it rested on.

The Flood creature had obviously realized what had happened, and growled in anger. It flung it's tentacles at the Arbiter, who had now recently de-cloaked, but howled in agony when the Arbiter severed them.

Quickly sprinting away, the Arbiter was halfway outside to the platform when something large and black dropped out of the shadows and landed in front of him.

It was about the size of the Arbiter, with a huge, almost insectoid head. A long tail that ended in a spear tip projected out of the creature's back. It was entirely jet-black, and glinted in the semidarkness of High Charity.

The thing's jaws opened to reveal a massive set of teeth that dripped slime all over the floor; it hissed at the Arbiter, who glared back at it.

By the gods! One of the Holy Warriors!

The Arbiter could tell, that just like the Flood, this creature was ruthless and uncontrollable; it would kill anything besides it's brethren that stood in it's way. Glancing at the killer claws, long tail, and pointy teeth, the Arbiter knew it was suicide to dance with this thing at close range. He unsheathed the human shotgun and fired round after round at the creature. The Holy Warrior exploded; green blood and limbs flew everywhere as it exploded.

And to the Arbiter's dismay, some of the holy essence of the fallen warrior splashed onto his armor! It burned a hole through his shields and began to eat away at his armor!

Molecular acidâ€|like the kind we used in our prototype weaponsâ€|

The Arbiter cursed in his native Sanghelli tounge and pulled off the small chunk of his armor. It disintegrated in his arms; giving the sizzling pool of acid a wide berth, the Arbiter sprinted outside to the platform, scanning the skies for the Phantomâ€|

And found it missing. The Arbiter paused; shocked, he looked again; surely, the Phantom had just camouflaged itself or was hiding below the platform; he hadn't taken that long, had he?

A loud screech distracted the Arbiter. Turning, he was horrified as legions of Holy Warriors tumbled out of High Charity's doors; even more climbed up the side of the platform and down the walls, scaling it like human flies.

The Arbiter felt his arms go slack. There was no way he could defeat this many warriors; he was wounded and missing a piece of his armor just from fighting one creature! The shotgun had three shells left, and the Plasma Sword was absolutely no use in close; the acid from the warriors would surely kill him then!

Retreating and throwing his last two grenades into the slowly advancing column of hissing, obsidian black forms of the warriors, the Arbiter drew his Energy Sword. If he was going to die, he would die with honor!

"Don't be stupid; you need to live, Arbiter!" came a voice from inside of his armor. It was the human construct; somehow, it was communicating with his helmet's transceiver unit.

"The Phantom is gone. We will both perish here. And if I am to perish now, I will do it with honor and distinction, like the Arbiters of the past have done!" the Arbiter growled, crouching into a battle stance. Honor demanded it.

"Don't be an idiot! I can activate this gravity lift you're standing on; we can escape to the lower levels and you can find and pilot a Seraph fighter to the Pious Inquisitioner, correct, Arbiter?" the construct asked. And before the Arbiter could respond, the hole in the floor opened up beneath him, and the Arbiter was sucked down into the lift.

The lift instantly sealed itself as soon as the Arbiter was clear; this still did not stop the Holy Warriors. They crawled down the sides of the platform and followed the Arbiter down; as soon as the Arbiter felt himself hit the bottom of the lift, he sprinted towards the exit.

The screeching of the Holy Warriors resounded in the Arbiter's ears as he descended down yet another gravity lift. He was nearing the Mausoleum of the Arbiter; the place where he was united with his new armor and bestowed the title of Arbiter.

It was trashed. Sanghelli, Lekgolo, Jiralhanae, Kig-Yar, Unggoy, and Flood bodies littered the ground. The Arbiter shook his head at the destruction as he ran; the Holy Warriors were extremely fast, and were making up ground quickly.

As the Arbiter ran through a thick set of doors guarding the final gravity lift that lead to High Charity's docking bays, the doors sealed themselves behind him.

"That should slow them down somewhat" the construct said. The Arbiter kept going; leaping into the gravity lift, he fired two of his last shots of his shotgun down the hole. He was rewarded by an alien screech of pain; it seemed impossible, but the Holy Warriors were STILL following him! No matter what kind of evasive maneuvers or tricks the Arbiter performed, they still persisted. He had to hand it to them; they were resourceful!

The Arbiter stepped into the ship bay; the Phantoms were all missing, but two Seraphs were still left. One looked like it had sustained heavy battle damage; it looked like it was falling apart at the seams. The other looked just fine.

The Arbiter boarded the second Seraph and hit the ignition switch. Nothing. He tried again. Still nothing. Sticking his head into the engine compartment, the Arbiter was dismayed at the damage done to the internal components of this Seraph; it was destroyed beyond repair.

Hoping the second one could at least fly, the Arbiter ran inside the ramshackle Seraph and hit the ignition switch. Relieved at the fact that the engines hummed to life beneath him, the Arbiter was about to shut the access hatch when a pair of black, obsidian fingers wedged their way in. They slowly began to pry open the door, revealing a dark, obsidian head. It hissed, and to the Arbiter's horror, he could see a second set of jaws hidden behind the first!

What are these things? How could our lords have created them? Or did they even create them?

Struck by an idea, the Arbiter unsheathed his shotgun. Sticking the muzzle into the second set of jaws, he fired the last round of his shotgun. The creature's head exploded just as the Arbiter slammed the hatch shut. The acid, no matter how potent, could not breach the heavy shielding of the Seraph.

Seating himself inside the cockpit of the tiny ship, the Arbiter guided the tiny craft away from High Charity, where he saw a Phantom desperately circling outside.

"Arbiter? Is that you? We thought you had perished; the Flood drove us off with their Banshees" came the voice of the Sanghelli Pilot.

"It is no matter. I have recovered the human construct, and have important news I must share with you all. Please, let us proceed to the Pious Inquisitioner"

The Seraph and Phantom roared into the hangar bays of the small cruiser just as it was recalling all of its patrols.

"If you had taken much longer, Arbiter, we would have left without you" came the voice of Portumee Zanagzee. The Arbiter chuckled; a low, guttural laugh. The Seraph's engine gave out just as the force field securing the hangar winked closed; Unggoy scattered and ran as the mortally wounded Seraph crashed to the ground in a heap. The Phantom was anchored to a support dock; the humans and Sanghelli inside hopped out of the gravity lift. Behind them, the four human drop ships were neatly parked in rows; the humans and Unggoy were helping to unload the weapons aboard them.

Keyes and Johnson approached the Arbiter.

"You got her. Please, give her here" Keyes said, extending her hand. The Arbiter reached into his armor pocked and extracted the tiny data chip. Keyes pocketed it.

"Nice work, Arbiter. Thank you" she said.

"Hah. I could have made it faster!" Johnson ribbed. The Arbiter's mandibles parted in what would pass for a human smile, and they approached the bridge, humans and surviving Covenant in tow. It was imperative that they were properly informed of this new threat before proceeding; who knows where the Prophets had found the Holy Warriors?

Ch 5 coming soonâ€¦as soon as Iâ€¦am not so swampedâ€¦with homework!
ARGH!

5. Dr Halsey's Surprise

Author's Note: Wow, I actually have time between school and Karate to write this fic! I'm going to reveal what happened to the third SPARTAN in a later chapter, and by the way, the SPARTANS Rebecca and Luke are supposed to be symbolic of my sister and myself in Halo; I love using the "cheap" combo Plasma Pistol Overcharge/ Human Pistol Headshot, and my sister loves dual SMGS; all the quicker to mow down unsuspecting Grunts! And for those who said it couldn't be done, I have now taken the Alien AND Predator storyline and fused it with the Halo storyline! Flame me if you wish, but, I thought it would be appropriate for this to not be the first time humanity encounters Aliens or Preds. A special guest star from Alien will make an appearance in the later chappies, don't worry. Anyway, here's back to MC, where we find out this isn't the first time humans have seen Predators before!

****Chapter V****

****Dr. Halsey's Surprise****

The lift doors hissed open. The Master Chief, followed by the other SPARTANS, stepped into the medlab. A team of doctors poured over the wounded Marine; she was unconscious, and looked like she had lost a lot of blood. The Chief silently shook his head and moved on. That marine had saved him; just as the Demon was about to win, she had kicked it in the head, allowing the Chief the precious seconds he needed to finish it off.

The door in the back of the lab hissed open, and Dr. Catherine Halsey stepped through it. In surprise, she looked up at the Master Chief. He imagined what he looked like; his new Mark VI armor, only handed to him two days previously, now dented, bruised, perforated, and overall damaged, splattered with bits of human blood and green ichor from the fight with the Demon.

"Hello, John. It's good to see you again" she said. John moved forwards and shook her hand.

"Nice to see you to, ma'am. Would you mind telling me," he began, but she cut him off.

"Telling you where I went? All things in time. But, first, I want to show you this" she said, walking through the open door behind her. She was racing against the clock; she had five minutes to try and save Kelly from an unstoppable force. It was with them in the room, but hidden, hidden so even AI's like Cortana could not find it.

"What the hell is that?" was Linda's startled cry. John visibly recoiled at the sight. He was instantly reminded of an

"Egg. This thing is an egg," Dr. Halsey said, pointing her hand at the large, fleshy sac on the table. It was encased in a large tube; it looked like a small, transparent cryo-tube. Three minutes.

"Where did you find it?" John asked. His fingers twitched; even without a weapon, he was still ready to fight. Dr. Halsey paused for a minute, she fidgeted and looked uncomfortable. After what seemed

like ages, she finally prompted,

"Well, John, do you remember the tunnel you found us in on Reach?" she asked. The Master Chief nodded. Twenty seconds.

"Well, I recorded some of the glyphs found in those caverns, and found that they led to an old abandoned colony, only designated as LV-426. Years ago, contact with this colony was lost. We assumed it was a Covenant attack, but now I'm not so sure. You see, John, the crypts told of invincible warriors that could possibly even defeat the Covenant! So, naturally, I took Kelly with me to investigate; I figured that if all else failed, I could simply return home. Unfortunately, the Covenant DID arrive in system, and I was only able to recover this;" she said, gesturing towards the egg. It was a small lie, true, but it would work until the...procedure was finished. Ten seconds to go.

"Kelly. Do you know why I subdued you? Do you know why we only lingered for three hours around LV-426?" Dr. Halsey asked, fearing how her SPARTANS might react when she told them. She knew full well the risks if this did not work; she could lose Kelly and the trust of all of her SPARTANS. However, if it worked, it would be extremely beneficial to the UNSC. Five seconds.

"No, ma'am. I thought you just needed my help to get this thing aboard the ship. Why, Doctor?" she asked. Before anyone could react, Dr. Halsey drew a small vial of serum from her jacket and stabbed it into Kelly's neck. She slumped downwards; quickly, Dr. Halsey pushed another button; a large steel shield slid into place, separating her and Kelly from the other SPARTANS.

"I'm sorry, everyone. You will know how this turns out in a few hours. If I failâ€¦I'm sorry. I hope you can all forgive me" she said over the team COM frequency.

John punched the barrier. Surprisingly, it held. Luke and Rebecca fired their weapons at it; the hail of bullets and plasma didn't even phase the door.

"Strongest metal in the UNSC. Titanium plating reinforced with some of our new plasma technology we stole from the Covenant. What the hell could be that important that Dr. Halsey would steal Kelly from us to do it?"

The large egg still resided on the table next to John. Glancing at it, he was surprised to see something moving inside of it.

"Don't touch it! It might be some kind of trap!" Linda shouted. John recoiled; he could swear something was moving around inside of the egg. Curling his fingers into a fist, he stood and stared at the silent barrier. Watching. Waiting. Hoping that whatever the Doctor had planned for Kelly paid off; he didn't want to lose another SPARTAN.

On the other side of the barrier, Dr. Halsey worked feverently. An incision there, a snip thereâ€¦it was frantic. If she was too late or screwed this up, she and the other SPARTANS were going to die. She knew it, but the idea of one of these "Holy Warriors" at the disposal of the UNSC was too good an idea to let pass up.

Quickly inserting a pair of gauntlets into the pulsating flesh, she extracted her prize; it wriggled and hissed, but was quickly deposited into a stasis tube. It grew silent and limp as the tube took effect. The stun gas coupled with the repulsors in the tube kept the creature suspended and unconscious; the fact that the gasses in the chamber took effect on the creature was good; one of these things let loose would spell certain doom for anyone aboard this ship.

Sighing in relief, Dr. Halsey began to stitch Kelly back up. She didn't deserve this, didn't deserve it at all; it was a shame. At least now Kelly was safe; she'd stay knocked out and healing for several hours, but after 24 hours, Dr. Halsey figured Kelly would be fine.

Hitting the button to open the door, Dr. Halsey wasn't surprised to be staring down the barrels of a sniper rifle, a human pistol, a plasma pistol, the long muzzle of a Battle Rifle, and three SMGs. She held her hands up.

"You mind telling me what the hell you just did?" Luke asked. He was always brash and aggressive; he was reluctant to be recalled from the front lines and back to Earth. Dr. Halsey sighed and flung off her gory gloves.

"Kelly will be fine. The operation was unpleasant, but it worked" she said. Rebecca pushed her lead SMG closer to Dr. Halsey's head.

"What. Exactly. Did. You. Just. Do?" she asked.

"Do you want to see?," Dr. Halsey asked, already guessing the answer. She held up the stasis tube. Even from the normally terse SPARTANS, she could almost feel the revulsion and disgust that emanated from them.

The thing in the stasis tube was almost snake-like, still covered in gore from it's last residence in Kelly's chest. It had large, sharp teeth, and beady black eyes. If it had been awake, it probably would have tried to attack; but it lay limp and silent inside of it's tiny prison. She set the tube down next to the egg, and turned just as Fred asked,

"What the hell is that thing?"

Dr. Halsey sighed again and hit another button on her console. Another stasis tube emerged; it held a small, crablike organism with a long, whiplike tail. Next to it was a SPARTAN helmet with a hole punched right through it. It was a clean, round hole. John was shocked; never had he ever seen something like this. Not even the most powerful Covenant warriors, the Brutes, could punch a hole that cleanly through a SPARTAN helmet. Dr. Halsey began to speak.

"I guess I must explain myself. You see, these 'Holy Warriors', as they are referred to, start off in those eggs," she began, gesturing towards the egg on the table, "and out of those eggs comes one of these" Dr. Halsey continued, pointing towards the crab.

"This thing latches onto the face of a victim, paralyzing them and putting them into a coma. As you can see, it is even strong enough to

pierce a SPARTAN's helmet."

"Next, while this thing keeps you in a coma, it lays an egg inside of your chest. This thing will then fall off and die. But it is not over then; the egg will grow until it has reached sufficient maturity, and will exit the host, usually in a violent manner" Dr. Halsey dictated, her face grave.

"So if you failedâ€¦" Luke began.

"Yes. Kelly would die. If I didn't remove this thing quickly enough, it would kill Kelly. If I removed it too early, it would die. I had to time this just right; three hours before the thing was scheduled to burst out of Kelly's chest. But this isn't it's final form; this is only it as a pupa" Dr. Halsey continued.

"It gets worse. This thing will continue to grow until it reaches maturity. Have you ever heard of the Sulaco debacle of 2319?" Dr. Halsey asked. The SPARTANS shook their heads.

"I didn't think so. This was when the UNSC was in it's infancy and the Halycron Class Cruisers were still in their prototype stages. A civilian hauler, called the Nostromo, landed on the planet I visited, LV-426. They reported encountering a 'strange ship' on the planet, and when one of their scouts ventured too far into the ship, he came out with one of these," Dr Halsey pointed to the crab, "attached to his face. The thing burst out of his chest, and devastated the crew. The only survivor was named Lieutenant Ellen Ripley, and she died fighting these things 200 years ago. She died on a prison colony, Fiorina 161," Dr. Halsey finished, looking at her SPARTANS.

"Ma'am, with all due respect, what the hell does this 'Ripley' person have to do with this thing you have in that tube? She's two hundred years dead!" Will said.

"Then it's time you met her. You may come in now, Ellen".

A middle aged woman strode into the room. She had shoulder-length brown hair, and wore, to John's surprise, the old dress uniform of the UNSC, from many, many decades ago.

"Hello. I'm Ellen Ripley, as Dr. Halsey here has probably told you. You're probably all wondering; what the hell is this thing? How can we stop it? And you're all probably wondering about me, too. But I know all about you. The famed SPARTAN super-soldiers; strength of steel, power to crush the mighty Covenant armada, supposedly invincible. 'SPARTANS never die'" she smiled, an almost wicked smile, at the battle-hardened warriors who stood before her.

"Well, I can tell you this; if you're going off to fight these things, you're all going to die".

6. Return to Halo

****Author's Note: ****wo0t, an update every day! Of course, with three projects for school coming up, I won't have much time to write anymore.. tt Anyway, I intended for there to be three Sergeant Stackers; I named them individually, to avoid confusion; Joseph Stacker is the Stacker on the Pillar of Autumn, and the one who is on

Halo 04, John Stacker is the Stacker on In Amber Clad, and Ryan Stacker is the Stacker on the Column of Solstace. Enjoy Chapter 6, everyone! As always, read and review!

****Chapter VI****

**** Return to Halo****

"and so, the Holy Warriors and the Flood are still on High Charity" the Arbiter finished. It had taken more than two hours, but he had finally filled the entire bridge crew of the Pious Inquisitioner of the events in High Charity.

"Arbiter. Are you sure these are the Holy Warriors of legend? Are you sure of what you saw?" one senior Elite asked. The Arbiter snapped his mandibles in anger.

"Does THIS prove what I saw? You can scan the construct's databanks, recheck the Seraph's logs and external cameras, but nothing could do this to the ceremonial armor of the Arbiter!" he exclaimed, showing off the missing chunks and burned holes in his armor.

"Enough! The Arbiter seems to be telling the truth! We will arrive at Halo in four units! Prepare a few dropships and two Seraphs, and prepare for combat! We do not know if the Flood survived the destruction of the sacred ring, but we must constantly be vigilant!," Portumee' said.

With that, the Arbiter, Johnson, Keyes, and the Holy Oracle floated out of the room.

"Oracle. Tell me, do you think the Flood survived the destruction of the Holy Ring?"

"Why must you use such impromptu titles? Oracle? Sacred ring? If you must know, as I have stated multiple times, I am the Monitor of Installation 04. I am 343 Guilty Spark!"

The Arbiter was confused. The Prophets had referred to this keeper of archives as the "Oracle". But maybe it was time to discount some of the Prophet's sayings; after all, they had lied about the Great Journey.

"So, tell me then—Monitor—will we find the Flood on Installation 04?" the Arbiter asked.

"Hmm. Well, after my logic matrices have calculated the odds of any Flood specimen's survival after the destruction of Installation 04, it is calculated at 67.9" the Monitor answered.

"What of our warriors? The humans?" the Arbiter questioned.

"As for that—I estimate a 1.2425325 chance of survival after the destruction of Installation 04" the Monitor cheerfully answered. The Arbiter sighed; he had been expecting this answer.

The Arbiter deviated course; he was headed for the armory. Maybe he could find some spare parts for his armor and find an Unggoy to repaint them. The sounds of Plasma fire alerted the Arbiter; something was going on. Glancing at the humans, who nodded back, they

sprinted towards the armory. As he ran into the room, the Arbiter almost stepped on a squealing Unggoy. It squeaked and jumped to attention.

"Ar-ar-ar-Arbiter!" it stuttered. The Arbiter glanced down at the tiny creature; it was quaking in fear, and looked afraid of something.

"What is wrong? What has happened?" he asked.

"I-I-I think it would be best if you saw for yourself, Arbiter" the Unggoy squeaked. It held it's Plasma Pistol in front of it like a shield as it advanced; Unggoy were never known for bravery. The Arbiter silently chuckled; it was probably just a loose conduit cable that had startled the hapless creature

Or not. As the Arbiter entered the Armory, a pair of Sanghelli boots protruded from a closet. The Arbiter drew his Plasma Rifle and stepped forward.

And was disgusted by what he saw. The Sanghelli lay next to his fallen Plasma Rifle; he had fallen trying to defend himself. A trail of plasma burns began next to an open air duct, and slowly led towards the closet.

"What's that on his face?" Keyes asked.

There was something attached to the warrior's helmet; it looked like some sort of insect. Long, spindly legs were wrapped around the Sanghelli's head, and it's long tail around his throat. He was still breathing, however; the Arbiter watched the warrior's chest rise and fall. He wore the armor of a minor warrior; a low ranking Blue Sanghelli.

"What happened? Did you see?" the Arbiter asked the Unggoy. It turned and replied;

"Mighty Arbiter, I did not see what happened. I was merely passing by, after my mid-afternoon food nipple, and heard fire. I thought some more of those Heretics had snuck aboard the ship; I rushed to help. Instead of a Heretic, I found this warrior with this thing attached to his face. And that's when you found me, sir!" it squealed.

"Ugh. Well, let's try and get it off him" Johnson said, drawing his combat knife. He knelt next to the fallen warrior and began to cut with the precision of an Engineer at the first knuckle of the creature. A small blotch of yellow blood formed at the cut; it burned through the Sergeant's knife like it was cheap tissue paper, and continued, burning a hole in the deckplates beneath them.

The Arbiter snapped into action.

"Quickly! The acid will burn a hole through the hull!" The Arbiter paused only to grab a portable energy shield generator and sprinted out of the armory, the humans and Unggoy hot on his heels.

As he descended one floor, the Arbiter looked up; sure enough, a smouldering hole was present in the ceiling. A similar hole smoked on the floor; the Arbiter snarled and ran down one more floor.

Thankfully, the acid seemed to have stopped.

It was impossible. The metal used in the Pious Inquisitioner was strong enough to absorb the impact of a plasma torpedo; how could this substance burn through it so easily?

The Arbiter was instantly reminded of the Holy Warriors on High Charity; how easily the holy essence had burned away his armor. But it was impossible, the Holy Warriors were massive, tall, black creatures; this thing was a tiny parasite. What was the connection between the two?

The Arbiter turned just as the humans and Unggoy skidded around the corner.

"Well, did it stop?" Keyes asked. The Arbiter shook his head yes.

"Hot damn! Look at what that crap did to my knife!" Johnson cursed, holding up the steaming handle of his combat knife. The blade was completely dissolved; the acid had burnt it away.

"Acid for bloodâ€¦what the hell do you think we're dealing with here, Arbiter?" Keyes asked. The Arbiter looked at the human; he was at a loss of words. He could not answer.

"I am unsure, human. Let us refrain from trying to cut this thing off of the warrior in the future" he said in a low voice.

"Maybe we could pry it off?" the Unggoy suggested. The Arbiter looked at it, and decided to try the simple creature's idea.

Walking back up to the armory, the Arbiter knelt next to the fallen Sanghelli. He noticed that the wound seemed closed; it had stopped the acid from escaping the body of the creature, at least. No more acid leaked out.

"Alright. Let's get it off of him" Keyes said, gripping the side of the creature. The Arbiter grabbed the other end; Johnson and the Unggoy grabbed the tail. Straining with all of their collective might, the four pulled at the creature. Johnson groaned as the creature tightened it's grip with the tail; this thing obviously wasn't coming off without taking the Sanghelli's head with it!

"Stop, humans! Stop! We cannot remove this creature without killing this warrior! We may find a way to take it off later; we are almost at the remains of the Sacred Ring" the Arbiter said. The Oracle floated in overhead.

"Oh? Do you need assistance? Oh, I see. Well, I do say your efforts with that are in vain," it said, looking at the warrior.

"What do you mean?" the Arbiter asked the floating orb.

"Once impregnation has begun, there is no stopping. The bodyguard of my creators will not be denied" it said cryptically.

"What do you mean? The bodyguard of the Forerunner?" Keyes asked, but before she could question the Oracle further, the ship jolted.

"We have reached the Holy Ring, warriors! Prepare for combat!"

Staff Sergeant Joseph Stacker knew he should be dead. But he wasn't.

After the Flood had attacked, he knew that he and the other three Marines and one Navy techie with him should have died. But they didn't.

I should have died when this goddamn ring exploded. But, noooo, I still live.

At least the Flood hadn't found them yet. Surviving on rations from the remnants of their two Pelicans, the Marines had held out here since the destruction of Halo, almost two weeks ago.

What's the point? There isn't gonna be any rescue!

But Stacker knew he couldn't quit; not now, not when his men needed him. So he forced himself, day after day, to keep living.

Loading his M5AB Assault Rifle with a new clip of ammunition, he was first out on patrol that evening. Looking up, he saw the now-familiar sight of the partially destroyed Halo ring above him; the Chief and Cortana hadn't done a very good job. They had only destroyed 2/3 of Halo; the remaining 1/3 was still habitable.

The other three Marines, Corporal John Marina, Lieutenant Meghan Cummings, Private Robert McKinnon, and the Navy Techie, Rachel Hunt, were holding out on hope and prayer. Their rations would not last forever, and there were still Covenant left on this section of the ring.

Stacker sighed and gazed over the horizon, into the stars. He had seen the Chief's Longsword hijack one of the Covenant cruisers almost two weeks ago; he hoped the Chief had accomplished his mission and saved humanity. He would be sure to come back and investigate the ruins of the ring; there might still be survivors. Like himself and the other Marines.

Stacker saw something out of the corner of his eye. He rubbed his eyes; surely, he must be seeing things. But his eyesight was true; two Human Pelicans were flying over the horizon! At last, the rescue party had arrived.

Eagerly sprinting back into their makeshift "base", made out of the remnants of the Pelican, two Covenant dropships and a natural cave formation, Stacker shouted;

"Alright people! Saddle up; we're going home!"

The Marines looked at him with tired eyes. Marina sighed and looked back down; his shotgun and M6D Pistol lay next to him. McKinnon stood up and laughed.

"Very funny, Stacker. Are you sure that is what you saw? Are you sure you aren't nuts? We all want to go home, but unfortunately, no one cares about us. Nobody" he said, sitting back down. Meghan scowled at him; always the optimist, she and Stacker had kept morale high when

times were low; and now, they couldn't be much worse.

"Buck up, Marine! I don't know about you, but I'm going outside to see what all the ruckus is about!" she declared, gathering a packet of signal flares and her Sniper Rifle, and marching outside. She and Stacker scanned the skies; nothing. The Pelicans were gone.

Lowering their eyes in disappointment, they began to head back inside. Meghan slapped Stacker on the back and said,

"It's ok, sir. We're all stressed; hell, I'd be seeing crap too if I was you" she said. Most semblance of rank and seniority was lost when Halo exploded; Meghan and Stacker were the only ones who kept it up.

A large, dark shadow circled overhead. Looking skywards, Stacker and Meghan's faces lit up when they saw it was a Pelican! Meghan squealed with joy and lit a signal flare; it burned a fluorescent red and alerted the Pelican to their position. The Pelican began to descend.

"Get your sorry asses out here now, Marines! I SAID we're going home, and we are!"

Marina and Hunt sprinted outside; sure enough, the Pelican was slowly descending, the other Pelican was touching down several clicks away. Their faces lit up like children at Christmas as they beheld the Pelicans. They whooped and jumped for joy.

"What the hell are you guys doing? Are you all crazy or something?". McKinnon still didn't believe. Stacker had enough; he ran back into their makeshift shelter, grabbed the Marine by the back of his neck, and pulled the boy outside. McKinnon's jaw dropped in awe as he beheld the Pelicans.

"Oh my godâ€¦you were right, Sargeâ€¦" he moaned.

"Pinch me; I'm dreaming, I'm gonna wake up any second nowâ€¦" Marina muttered. Hunt slapped him upside the head; he groaned.

"There. You awake now?" she asked with a smile. Stacker knew that they had a little thing going; despite the fierce rivalry between the Navy and the Marines, they had somehow fallen for each other on the Pillar of Autumn.

"Ooh, you're gonna get it now!" he exclaimed, pinning her and tickling her. Stacker smiled at the Marine's antics; his men were gonna be fine.

Until he saw what came out of the Pelicans; Elites, lots of Elites, armed with human weapons! Stacker's eyes widened in horror as the Elites spotted the Marines; they pointed, growled in joy at the sight of their quarry, and slowly began to walk up the hill. Either the Covenant had something planned, or were just stupid; Meghan had snapped her sniper rifle into position and had taken a bead on the first Elite.

"Hold your fire, marine. Let's see what these bastards have planned for us. It may not be a trap" Stacker growled, holding up his hand. Even so, he readied his rifle, checking the clip; it was full.

"Hold your fire, humans. We are not here for blood or battle" the lead Elite said. It held a human Shotgun in it's hands, and it wore an unknown type of armor; it was dark blue, and Stacker had never seen anything like it before. Until now.

"Just give me one reason why the hell I shouldn't blow your brains out of your skull, huh, squid-face?" Meghan asked, pointing her Sniper Rifle right between the alien's eyes. The Elite laughed at her. She glared and put her finger on the trigger.

"Now, human, if we really wanted to kill you, we could have done so from orbit. We knew that you were here, based on the wreckage strewn around the area. Now, please, come with us" it said, lowering it's weapon.

"Why should we trust you? You're just gonna use us to find Earth!" Marina shouted, aiming his rifle at the Elites.

"If you will not listen to me, you will listen to them" the Elite growled in frustration, stepping to the side. And to Stacker's surprise, Sergeant Johnson and Miranda Keyes strode forward. They looked unchanged; Johnson still had a cigar in his mouth, a pistol and knife at his belt, and a Sniper Rifle over his shoulder. Miranda wore her Captain's uniform, just like her father's, and had an SMG slung at her hips.

"Johnson? Is that really you?" Stacker asked, lowering his rifle.

"No, it's the Easter Bunny. Who the hell do I look like, marine? Now, c'mon, let's get going; we have more to do here!" Johnson said, spitting out a wad of tobacco.

"Wait. Why the hell should I trust you? You could have been brainwashed by the Covenant, or this could be a trick! A trick!" Stacker yelled, raising his rifle again. Johnson sighed, and mumbled something to the Elite next to him.

And as if Stacker wasn't surprised enough, someone appeared. Someone Stacker had never expected to see again.

It was his little brother. His brother Johnny. He had come.

"Hey, bro" John said. Stacker didn't know what to do; he was shocked and amazed. Dropping his rifle, Stacker stood and embraced his younger brother.

"Ok. You all got me. Let's go home" Stacker said, in between sobs. Tears ran down his mud-streaked face.

"I thought you were dead, brother," John said. Stacker smiled and scooped up his rifle, slinging it over his shoulder.

"Why are you with the Covenant? Did we win the war?" Stacker asked. His brother shook his head.

"The Elites, Grunts, and Hunters were expelled from the Covenant. Johnson signed a peace treaty with that Elite there, the Arbiter," he said, pointing towards the Elite in the weird armor.

"What are you doing here?" Stacker asked again.

"We're looking for something called the 'Arc'. It is supposed to be able to shut down or fire all of the Halos at once".

Stacker's eyes widened.

"You mean there's MORE Halos?"

John shook his head yes.

"We just found another ring. Only thirty three Marines and several pilots and technicians from In Amber Clad survived the second Halo. That is why we must find this 'Arc' and deactivate all the Halos" John said grimly. Stacker sighed, and then stood up straight.

"Well, we all have to die sometime. And besides, I really don't have a choice, now do I?" Stacker asked.

"Count me in" Meghan said, coming up behind them.

"Me too. I hope these rings and the Flood claim no more innocent lives" Marina agreed.

"I'm coming too. I need to see this through to the end" Hunt chimed in.

"What about you, McKinnon?" Stacker asked, glancing at the other Marine. He glanced back and said;

"Sir, I'm not a very good fighter. I nearly died here on this accursed ring; fate, I guess, is the only thing that saved me. Well, then, sir, if fate kept me alive here, fate can keep me alive with you. I'm coming, too".

Stacker smiled at the younger marine.

"Good to hear, son. Now, let's go find this 'Arc' and stop the Flood." And with that, the marines and Elites boarded their Pelicans, and soared off into the night.

7. Express Elevator to Hell

****Author's Notes: ****Ok, finally, an update! w00t! Anyway, I've begun the long process of overhauling my old chapters, while thinking up new ones. Thank you everyone who has reviewed thus far. Soon, I will post my revised chapters (I feel that some characters were a little OOC and the chapters, especially #3, could be a little more drawn out), and don't worry- I'm nowhere close to finished!

****Ch VII****

****Express Elevator to Hell****

The Master Chief clicked his armor shut; it hissed silently, the suit sealing itself up. Suit up time elapsed; fifteen minutes to fully don and test his armor's systems.

Next to him, the other SPARTANS were dazzled by their new suits. Like the Chief had only two days previously, had received their superior armor units; the Mark VI armor suit. The Chief, of course, had noticed the immense difference between his old Mark V armor systems; for one, the Mark VI allowed him to run faster, and jump higher. The suit also allowed the Chief to hit harder, and to hold two weapons, like Covenant Plasma Rifles, in each hand, something the weaker systems of the Mark V system didn't allow for. It also made him quicker, and able to withstand massive shocks, like the impact of a slow moving Ghost or the impact of a fall. This was handy for quickly side-stepping and kicking the drivers of Covenant Ghosts out of their vehicles, or even jumping on top of Covenant Wraith mortar tanks to disable its unfortunate driver.

On the other side of the armory room of the Column of Solstice, the Lieutenant, Ellen Ripley, silently prepared for battle. She had briefly introduced herself, and warned them of their supposed doom, before being dismissed by Dr. Halsey two days previously.

"_If you go off to fight these things, you're all going to die"._

Fred stiffened.

"_Excuse me, ma'am?" he asked, confused. Ripley had smiled, a sadistic, twisted smile, and replied;_

"_You understood me, soldier. You will all die. If the human race allows one of these things to escape to Earth, we're all doomed. They'll completely take over. Just like the Nostromo and LV-426. I've seen what these things are capable of; even if you kill the hive mind, the Queen, another will spring up in its place" she said._

"_So, ma'am, what exactly happened the last time you tried to fight these things? You won, didn't you?" the SPARTAN Luke asked.

_

"_Well, I, or Ellen Ripley, died to stop the Xenomorphs. I am Ripley 08, a clone of Ellen Ripley. Your boys at ONI did a fantastic job; I truly feel like I'm Ellen Ripley. I also have every one of her memories. I remember the Nostromo and the terror just one of those things caused. I remember the Sulaco incident on LV-426. A team of elite Marines, the SPARTANS of their age, all died, fighting against these things. And finally, on Fiona 161, I died, to stop the spread of the Xenomorph species. Then, I was brought back, only ten years after the start of the Covenant- Human war. They thought that by resurrecting me, the ONI spooks could find a new weapon to use against the Covenant- this, of course, was all top- secret, and everyone behind the project is dead, save one. I don't know who he is or even if he is still alive, but I do know that he was also very interested in the SPARTAN II project. The smuggler who saved me, Call, died when we ran into a Covenant patrol cruiser about one parsec from Reach. I was able to escape, and then the UNSC intercepted the drop ship I stole two months before the fall of Reach. Since then, I've been re-assigned here, aboard this ship, as a NOCOM petty officer. Supposedly, ONI has new intelligence about where and why that Prophet, Regret, attacked Earth. Why he only attacked New Mombassa, Kenya. Master Chief, John 117, you were there when that Prophet escaped, no?" she asked, sighing after her long speech. The

Chief nodded his head in assent._

"_Yes, ma'am. Regret attempted to escape once we took down one of their walkers, the Scarab, but the crew of the cruiser In Amber Clad and I followed him to Delta Halo" he recounted. _

"_We think that these things," Ripley began, pointing at the Alien specimens in their test tubes, "were always on Earth, since the beginning of recorded human history. Based on recent archeological finds, and old documents from before even the Jovian Moons campaigns, the boys at ONI believe that there is a hive of these creatures, buried five thousand meters, below the Earth's surface. That's what the Covenant were after this entire time; based on religious broadcasts Regret's ship was screaming before it left, their 'Holy Warriors' and our Xenomorphs are one in the same, and are on Earth, and have been, lying dormant for centuries," Ripley opened her mouth to continue, but Dr. Halsey cut her off._

"_That will do, Ripley. Go to the armory and send word that the new Mark VI suits are to be sent up from Engineering immediately; all the SPARTANS are here"._

Dr. Halsey sighed and watched Ripley leave. John saw she was tense; as if she was expecting Ripley to retaliate with some stinging remark, or even a physical attack. But the womanâ€|no, clone, continued to walk away, until the doors sealed shut behind her.

The Chief knew something was going on, something between Halsey and Ripley. He had no idea what exactly had happened between the two, but he suspected it had something to do with these new creatures, these "Xenomorphs".

Walking over to the weapons rack, the Chief strolled casually down the long rows of weapons, looking them all over. Standard issue Battle Rifles, five sets of M6C Pistols, SMG's, Shotguns, Sniper Rifles, and even two Rocket Launchers adorned the weapons racks. John selected a Shotgun for in close work, and a Battle Rifle for all targets in between. Linda, of course, strode up and down the lines, and eventually picked out a pair of M6C's, and her customized sniper rifle. The SPARTANS Rebecca and Luke were already set to go; Rebecca was carrying her dual SMG's, and a Battle Rifle was slung over her shoulders. Luke, of course, had his old M6D Pistol, Covenant Plasma Pistol, and a Shotgun at his back. Fred and Will carried a Battle Rifle and Shotgun, respectively, and were hauling the Rocket Launchers.

"Let's go. The Pelicans are ready for us," John said, picking up his gear and striding towards the door. On his way out, John also picked up a quadruplet of frag grenades, and attached them to his belt. The other SPARTANS did the same on their way out.

Ripley fell in line with the SPARTANS. John was surprised that he didn't recognize the weapon slung at her hips; it looked like an antiquated M5AB Assault Rifle. What looked like a shortened shotgun was mounted under the rifle's barrel, and a small ammo counter adorned the side of the rifle. She carried a pouch, obviously full of clips, a small motion tracker, and a bandolier full of what looked like silver shotgun shells.

Approaching the Pelican bay, John noticed several technicians hastily

mounting what looked like miniature Archer Missile Pods on the wings and undersides of the Pelicans.

"It looks like it's gonna be a rough drop. Get ready, people" John said. The other SPARTANS flashed the acknowledgement signals via the team COM system, and boarded the three waiting Pelicans.

Ripley climbed into John's Pelican and took a seat near the cockpit. Five Marines boarded the drop ship after John, and sat down. One of them, to John's surprise, was the female Marine who had attempted to aid him in the docking bay. She looked normal- she had recovered quickly in two days, after what seemed then to be a mortal wound.

John knew the Covenant were still lurking out in space- they had pulled back their forces to somewhere beyond Saturn. The Marines on the ground were slowly and efficiently mopping up the remaining troops and preparing for the second wave of enemies. The Covenant wouldn't give up this easily.

"Ok, people! Listen up! This is gonna be a quick drop- this here pelican will be bringing us to Mombassa, where the last pockets of Covenant squid-headed tontos are hiding! Yes, hiding! The cowards know they don't stand a chance- and we're going down there to give them a good reason to fear us!" Sergeant Stacker, who was in the second Pelican, bellowed over the intercom.

"Remember, though, we're going to find out why the Covenant only landed in Mombassa. Get ready, Marines!" the Corporal, next to the Chief, said to his squad. The Marines nodded, and loaded their weapons.

"Ten seconds to drop, repeat, ten seconds, people. Get ready!" called the pilot. The Pelican began to rumble beneath John's boots. The Marines looked tense, on edge. The marine sitting across from John, the one from the ship bay, though, looked grim and determined. She noticed the Chief staring, and nodded at him. The Chief nodded back as the Pelican nosed towards the bay doors.

"Five seconds. On my mark. Four. Threeâ€¦|" the Navy pilot droned. One marine grinned and shouted;

"We're on an express elevator to hell; next stop; DOWN!" he yelled.

"Two. One. Mark" the pilot said emotionlessly as the Pelican rocketed out of the bay.

"YAHOOOOOO!!!" the marine yelled as the Pelican picked up speed, burning through the Earth's atmosphere. The Pelican zipped past floating chunks and remnants of Covenant and UNSC ships; bits of grey and purple quickly flashed by the view port as the Navy pilot skillfully piloted his Pelican down to Earth.

The temperature inside the cabin began to rise; the Chief's suit kept him cool enough, but the Marines began to sweat a little in their armor. They were in Earth's atmosphere; landing time wasn't very far away.

"Heads up, people. Thirty seconds to dirt!" the pilot yelled,

confirming the Chief's suspicions. The Marines shifted uneasily, adjusting their armor, checking their weapons, and fidgeting with their grenades. The Chief sat still and stared out the window, reflecting on the last time he had come here, to Old Mombassa.

"_The message just repeats. Regret. Regret. Regret" Cortana said._

"_Catchy. Any idea what it means?" Keyes asked._

"_Dear humanity. We REGRET being alien bastards. We REGRET coming to earth. And we most definitely regret the fact that the Corps just shot up our raggedy-ass fleet!" Sergeant Johnson bellowed a massive smirk on his face._

"_Hoo-rah!" the Marines and Navy pilots chimed in. Sergeant Johnson had smiled his usual, insane grin._

"_Regret is a name, Sergeant. The name of a Prophet. He's on that cruiser and is signaling for help," Cortana said. _

The Chief smiled; Johnson was nuts. The Sergeant was one of the only marines who had survived Installation 04, the first Halo. The Sarge had come through a lot, from the Siege of Paris IV, the Fall of Reach, Installation 04, and the Covenant invasion of Earth. It was a shame that he was now missing, or dead, back on Delta Halo.

"We're here, marines! Go! Go! Go!" Sergeant Stacker yelled. It was true; the Pelican had landed in the remnants of what looked to be a small courtyard. The Chief cocked his Battle Rifle's firing lever, and took point.

"Fall in, Marines. Dispersion formation Alpha. Go, go, go!" the Chief barked into his COM. It was usually Cortana that had given orders to the marines on their missions, like the assault on the Covenant cruiser Truth and Reconciliation back on Installation 04. Now that Cortana was gone, though, the Chief was on his own.

The two other Pelicans roared overhead; the Chief knew their objective was to sweep the area Regret's forces had staked out, and begun drilling in. The Prophet had been looking for something; the Chief needed to know what it was he was looking for.

Walking up several flights of stairs, it was only when he saw it did the Chief recognize his location. The remains of a battered Covenant walking assault vehicle, a Scarab, stood at the end of the long canal. This was the area where the Master Chief had boarded the said Scarab, and taking it and its occupants out before pursuing Regret to Delta Halo. The remnants of the Scarab stood tall, almost like some kind of monument. Passing by the huge, imposing machine, the Chief noted the deck of the walker was still littered with the remains of multiple Covenant Grunts, Jackals, and Elites.

"This is SPARTAN -058, does anyone copy? We have made successful landfall and are now at the rendezvous point. Repeat, any other UNSC forces respond" Linda called in her normally stoic voice.

"Roger that, Linda. It's John, I'm on my way," the Chief said as he and the Marines pressed forward.

"John, get over here! There's something I think you should see" came the voice of Fred over the Chief's intercom. A NAV point appeared on the Chief's HUD.

"Linda, I'll be there in a second. Fred needs me for a moment. I'm sending my Marines on ahead; they'll be with you shortly" the Chief said, waving the Marines forwards. The Marines looked at the Chief quizzically, before shrugging and continuing on their way.

The Chief, rifle at the ready, walked briskly towards the point marked on his HUD. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, very wrong, with the situation. Gripping his rifle tighter, the Chief walked faster. The NAV point steadily grew closer, going from 5.3 meters to a mere 1.1 meters in a matter of seconds.

"Chief! Over here!" came a voice to the Chief's right. Fred was crouched over a low balcony; his Rocket launcher lay next to him, both rockets gone. The ends of the launcher still smoldered; he had been firing at something.

"Come look at this. These looks like the things that Ripley was talking about," he said, pointing down below. The Chief looked downwards.

Two craters adorned the small pit below. A small hole in the wall extended into darkness, revealing nothing of it's contents. And next to this hole, were five dead bodies. Obsidian black, with massive, insectoid heads, and huge claws and a massive tail, these things looked exactly like Ripley said they did.

"These things came out of nowhere. I told the Marines to keep going; they're at the rendezvous site, Linda just told me. I heard something, and when I went to check it out, these things attacked. I dispatched them, and then called for you, thinking that Ripley person was with you. Where is she?" Fred asked.

"She's at the rendezvous site. We should report back, especially if more of these things are loose" John said, turning to go. Fred stood up slowly, but then recoiled in surprise.

"John! Look out!" he yelled, tackling the Chief. The Chief grunted and rolled with Fred, going forwards. A low hissing noise came from his right; turning, John saw a large, dark mass, leap into the shadows.

"It's another one of those things. Go, Chief. I'll be right behind you" Fred said, unsheathing his shotgun. The Chief fired his Battle Rifle at the moving shadows; it screeched, and leaped at Fred. Fred kicked the creature in the gut and blew it's head off with his shotgun while it was distracted. A loud screech echoed through the deserted alley, and more creatures began to rise from the shadows.

"Go, Chief! Go! I can handle them! Go!" Fred yelled over the din of the screeching creatures and the booming of his shotgun. The Chief hesitated for a moment, and turned to run. After he had rounded two corners, a loud explosion rocked the ground John was standing on. It had come from the balcony—the balcony Fred had stood on.

Turning around, John stood at attention. Raising his arm in a salute,

he silently stared at the rising column of smoke, Fred's final work. The loud screeches of the Xenomorphs, however, broke the Chief's reveille, and he turned, and sprinted away.

8. Remnants

Chapter VIII

Remnants

"Please, follow me, Reclaimer," the Monitor cheerfully hummed as it sped out of the Pelican's troop bay. Miranda Keyes sighed; why, out of all the Marines, Covenant, did this precocious little machine choose her as the "Reclaimer"? Why her, and not someone else, like that elite, the "Arbiter", or Johnson? Miranda looked up; a large pyramid, covered in snow, dominated the face of what looked like a large cliff. A large bump in the snow that looked like the remnants of a Wraith mortar tank stood behind them. Miranda shivered and began to march up the slopes of the pyramid, towards the Control Room.

It seemed that bad things ran in the family. Her father had discovered the first Halo ring. His ship, the Pillar of Autumn, had been destroyed when the Master Chief escaped and destroyed the ring. From the Chief's report and Cortana's databanks, Miranda learned the fate of her father; after hearing that the Pillar of Autumn had fled the carnage at Reach, she had kept optimistic about her father's mission and his survival. Unfortunately, when only the SPARTAN super soldiers and Sergeant Johnson returned from the first Halo, she knew that her father was dead. The terms of her father's demise, however, were nothing short of horrible.

Based on the Chief's records and the data extracted from Cortana, her father had been in constant pain before he died. He had become the central brain of the parasitic entity called the Flood, a new kind of parasite that dominated a host body, and then turned it into a mindless zombie form that attacked anything it came across. Unfortunately for her father, the Flood obviously knew that Keyes was important. So they assimilated him into their most important Flood form, the Brain Form. This thing, based on the Chief's camera feeds, was huge, about two times the size of a normal human. It was large and puffy, and upon close examination, had also consumed the ranking Covenant officer, as well. Sapping Keyes of his strength until he died, the thing learned how to take the Autumn's core offline- the Monitor had gotten to it first, though.

The Arbiter, the massive blue elite that stood before her now, had told stories of an even bigger Flood form, lurking inside of Delta Halo's Library. It had called itself "Gravemind", and when the Arbiter had gone into the remnants of High Charity to extract Cortana, the thing had been there, too. The Arbiter had boasted that he killed it, but Keyes was uncertain; the Flood were very resilient, she could give them that. When she and Johnson had stormed the Library, Keyes had unloaded an entire clip of SMG ammunition into a charging Flood form to make it collapse. Still, the idea of another Flood form greater than the one that had been her father's- at least the Flood were stuck on High Charity, she was sure of that. That ship was not going anywhere.

"Active Camouflage will not work against the parasite, warriors. They

can see right through it; we are in their hive" the Arbiter said. It was true; the Monitor had led them into the remains of the Control Room of Installation 04. So far, the Flood were nowhere in sight, but that did not mean that they were not lurkingâ€|waitingâ€|for the right moment to strike. Keyes gripped her SMG's in anticipation, her eyes darting back and forth, watching the shadows. Her father's fate would not befall her.

The soft blue glow of the Monitor was a stark contrast to the blinding white light of the Marine flashlights. The Elites had borrowed some Marine flashlights; Johnson and Miranda, being the "Reclaimer" and all, were the only humans to accompany the Elites on this trip; the energy shields of the Elites would protect them from Flood spore forms. Humans were vulnerable, though; Johnson and Keyes were in the center of the group, protected by a circle of Elites. The Elites nervously flexed their fingers around their Plasma Rifles, Needlers, and Carbines, mumbling battle hymns and poems. The Arbiter had chosen an odd assortment of weapons; his traditional Plasma Sword at his waist, a human shotgun at his back, and a Covenant Carbine in his arms. Normally, it was an unspoken rule between all armed forces to never carry more than two weapons, but the Arbiter was prepared for whatever the Flood would throw at him in the darkness of the devastated Control Room.

"Hmm hmm hmm. Ahh, the Sentinels have still not repaired the damage done by the last Reclaimer" the Monitor hummed as it passed over a large mass of bodies. Keyes noted the massive holes blown in several of the more human looking forms, and the plasma burns and shrapnel imbedded in the others. Spent shotgun shells littered the floor; the amount scattered was a testament to the sheer tenacity of the Flood.

"Ahh, the last Reclaimer was most uncooperative. He failed to follow containment protocol, and almost let the Flood escape this installation" the Monitor sighed. Keyes smiled; the Chief had done a number on the Flood here. Plasma burns, thousands of empty brass cartridges that looked like they came from the archaic M5AB Assault Rifle and larger shells from an M6D Pistol lay next to a large, smoking crater, where a discarded Rocket Launcher lay empty. Flood goo and a small bloodstain decorated the wall behind them. Keyes shuddered and followed the Elites forward.

"We are near the central complex. When we reach it, I will be able to access this Installation's databanks" the Monitor reported.

"Good. Let's go" Keyes said.

Footsteps began to echo behind them. The Elites noticed it first; the last Elite turned, his dual Plasma Rifles held at head height, ready to severely maul anything that decided to follow them. Nothing. The hallway was empty.

"Keep moving. It is probably the parasite, trying to ambush us. Keep your weapons at the ready" the Arbiter snarled, gripping his Carbine tightly. Keyes nodded and followed the Monitor.

Eventually, the central platform drew into view. It was not unlike the one in Delta Halo, the same platform where the Arbiter, Johnson, and Keyes had united to defeat Tartarus, the Brute Chieftain. The central console was still intact- a massive holoprojection showed the

damage done to this Halo. It would never fire again.

"Ahh, I am a genius. Ha, ha, ha!" the Monitor hummed as it floated over the center console. After a moment's silence, the machine shouted angrily,

"Oh, of all theâ€¦the Installation has locked me out of the archives! Without the Index, I cannot access these files!" the Monitor cried angrily.

Keyes suddenly felt a warm glow in her front pocket. Extracting the glow's source, she discovered Cortana's data chip, all but forgotten. Remembering that Cortana still had the Index, Keyes stepped forward and inserted the chip into the glowing terminal- it morphed and pulsed for a moment, and Cortana's hologram appeared above them.

"Well, I'm back" Cortana said smoothly. The Monitor seemed a bit agitated that Cortana was required to find the Arc- Keyes knew their past together, when the Chief had escaped Installation 04.

"Just get us the coordinates of the Arc and let's go" the Monitor huffed. This was extremely out of character for the little blue orb- it was usually talkative and annoying. Now it was terse and angry. It really had to hate Cortana to suddenly change personalities. Keyes chuckled slightly; AI constructs certainly were characters.

"Scanning. Searchingâ€¦Iâ€¦I don't believe it. Of course, it makes absolute senseâ€¦why didn't I guess this before?" Cortana asked, thinking out loud. Keyes piped up;

"Cortana. Where is the Arc?" she asked.

"You're not going to believe this, ma'am, but it's Sol. Earth" she said, her eyes flashing red. Keyes gasped; the Arbiter shook his head in confirmation.

"I had guessed this was Regret's true reason for attacking your home world so quickly, humans. We must make haste to your home planet and rally all forces loyal to the Sanghelli and take down Truth" the Arbiter said. The Elites growled in approval.

Suddenly, as the Elite on point turned to leave, it screamed in pain. Writhing and thrashing, the warrior was lifted into the air by an unseen force, and then flung sideways, like a discarded toy. He lay there, still breathing, for several moments before his eyes glazed over in death.

The Arbiter roared a challenge and fired his Carbine into the air. The green-yellow munitions sped through the air, impacting the walls and the floor. A low, gurgling chuckle came from the other side of the room, as three points of glowing red light focused on the Arbiter's helmet. Sensing what was about to happen, the Arbiter dodged out of the way as a flash of blue light whizzed by his helmet, impacting the terminal. Keyes grabbed Cortana's disc and fired her SMG's. There was the sound of bullets piercing flesh, and an unearthly roar echoed through the Control Room.

Johnson fired his weapon and roared,

"Let's rock!"

Screaming maniacally, he fired at the source of the loud yell, and was rewarded with the sound of bullets impacting metal. A trail of what looked like green blood seemed to appear out of thin air, trailing across the ground. Soon, all the fire from the Elites, Johnson, Keyes, and the Arbiter was aimed at this movingâ€|thing, stalker, whatever it was. Keyes snarled as the thing quickly changed course, throwing her aim off.

Another blue flare rocketed across the room. The Arbiter took this one in the chest. He grunted and flew backwards, off the sides of the platform, into the sheer drop towards the bottom of the Control Room! Keyes watched in horror as the Elite flailed and tried to grab onto the side railing as he went over; he missed. Keyes' head snapped over as an Elite gurgled; it's head bent backwards at a 180 degree angle. A horrible snapping noise was heard as the warrior's spine bent backwards, and the body was thrown sideways as the invisible warrior turned towards Keyes.

Horrified, Keyes depressed the triggers of her SMG's, only to find them click empty. Dropping the second weapon and reloading the first, Keyes desperately backed up, biding for time. The invisible stalker was following her, she could sense it. A low shimmer gave the creature away. It was only a few paces away from overtaking her.

Keyes' back hit the door of the Control Room. The thing kept coming closer and closer, soaking up her SMG bullets like a sponge soaks up water. Screaming, Keyes held her weapon in a death grip, even after the bolt snapped open and the weapon clicked. It was empty. Reaching into her pouch for another clip, Keyes' eyes widened as she didn't find one. This was the end; she was going to die, like her father before her.

As if to mock her, the creature in front of her de-cloaked as it neared her. It was a massive beast, hulking and tall. Several bullet wounds sprayed green blood, and a metal mask obscured the creature's face. The shoulder cannon didn't fire; instead, the creature sunk into a low battle stance, extending a long pair of wrist blades. It let out an odd gurgle/ chuckle, before saying, in a synthesized voice,

"_Hasta la vista_, baby".

Suddenly, the creature roared in pain. Keyes jumped sideways as the long point of a Plasma Sword severed the creature's arm with the wrist blades attached. Turning, Keyes saw it was the Arbiter! He looked somewhat spent, but was in a low stance, with his ceremonial Plasma Sword drawn.

"Fall back, human!" he cried. Keyes scrambled backwards, her eyes never leaving the strange creature. The thing turned and punched the Arbiter in the face, causing the Elite to curse in his native tongue, and recoil. His Plasma Sword tumbled out of the Elite's arms, and it hit the floor, snapping off on contact. The energy cell instantly discharged all of it's energy upon contact with the ground; it was now unusable.

The Arbiter struggled, trying to kick the creature away. The stalker had the Elite by the throat, and the Arbiter looked on the verge of faint.

A loud BANG rang through the halls as the white trail of a human sniper rifle passed through the stalker's head. Twitching for a second, the thing slumped to the ground, dead. Sergeant Johnson whooped and yelled,

"OH YEAH, BABY! HEADSHOT!" he cried triumphantly. The Arbiter, coughing up purple blood and holding his chest, slowly staggered to his feet. Two of the remaining Elites rushed to his aid; the Arbiter pushed them away.

"We need to leave. If your construct had the data, we must escape. More of those stalkers are coming, and the parasite cannot be far" the Arbiter coughed. Scooping up his useless sword, the Arbiter once again took point, Shotgun at the ready. The Elite was hiding it as best he could, but Miranda could see that he was exhausted. From the stories told by fellow Elites, the Arbiter had been fighting nonstop for several days, only being crowned "Arbiter" two days previously. He had fought with a "Heretic" leader one day previously, and had met the Chief today, courtesy of Gravemind.

The Pelicans were still waiting for them at the base of the pyramid. The group eagerly sprinted down towards them, eager to escape the carnage of the Control Room.

A gurgle to the left. Johnson wheeled in time to see a Flood combat form jump into the air, right at him. He fired two sniper rifle rounds into the creature's chest, but the thing kept coming. The Arbiter turned, drew his shotgun, and blew a massive hole where the Infection form resided in the zombie's chest. The creature continued on its flight, though, and landed with a dull splat against the pyramid wall.

The Pelicans hovered, waiting. The Marine pilots turned in their seats and yelled;

"Hurry up, everyone! Radar shows a massive column of vehicles heading this way!"

The Elites scrambled aboard the dropships. Keyes and Johnson hopped aboard the second one as it lifted off, just in time; a massive horde of Flood Combat and Carrier forms emerged, crawling like bugs out of the woodwork. Johnson tossed a frag grenade out of the side of the Pelican, and it blew, with a loud whoosh that momentarily deafened Keyes and blew a good chunk out of the attack force. The remaining troops, however, fired their weapons at the dropships. Crystalline needles, superheated plasma, and bullets whizzed past the open door of the Pelicans as they took off for their ship in orbit.

The back doors slammed closed as the Pelicans burned ground fast. Below them, hordes and hordes of Flood fired various weapons, including several rockets and Fuel Rods, at the slow, cumbersome, Pelicans. The pilots were able to nimbly dodge these shots, however, and kept the dropships on a steady path towards the orbiting cruiser.

A loud whistling whine filled the air around the Pelican. Keyes' eyes

widened in fear; it was the sound all Pelican pilots had learned to fear. The approaching whine that unmistakably belonged to Covenant Banshees.

Two Banshees appeared over the horizon. The Pelicans split up and put their ships into a spiraling roller coaster ride as the lead Banshee opened fire.

And to make matters worse, a large shell barely missed hitting the starboard wing. Glancing out of the back viewport, Keyes spied a Scorpion MBT perched below in a ravine. It was right in front of some kind of odd dam- it kept lobbing shells as the Pelicans whooshed by.

Three more Banshees appeared on the Pelican's radar, only twenty clicks away. Keyes saw them as tiny black dots on the horizon, approaching quickly.

"Open fire! Take em' down!" the pilot of the Pelican yelled. The copilot nodded and toggled the safety for the 70 mm chain gun on the Pelican's nose. The gun began to automatically track and fire on the incoming Banshees. The first two assailants went down in a blaze of smoke and fire as the chain gun turned them into Swiss cheese. The three new Banshees, however, had already closed the distance, and were opening fire with their Fuel Rod Cannons. The green blobs of energy tracked the Pelican as the pilots jinked and swerved to avoid them, a narrow miss saved them. The munitions harmlessly impacted a low ridge as the Pelican flew overhead.

Johnson was searching the weapons locker of the Pelican. Eventually growling happily as he extracted his prize, Johnson yelled to the pilot;

"Pilot, lower the back hatch. It's time to give our tail some sting!" he yelled, hefting the massive M19 SSM Rocket Launcher. The words "SPNKR" glowed in the semi-darkness of the Pelican's main hold. A breath mask also adorned the Sarge's face. Miranda wondered why he was wearing one- the air was fine enough to breathe. The back hatch opened, revealing the three Banshees hot on the Pelican's tail.

"Smile, you SOB's," the Sarge smiled as he fired off two rockets. The first Banshee was too slow to react, and was blown to smithereens, almost taking the second down with it. The second Banshee swerved to avoid the falling wreckage of the first Banshee, and realized too late that it had been set on an irreversible crash course with a cliff wall. The third Banshee dodged the rocket, and sped up, gaining on the Pelican. It was gonna ram the Pelican!

Sergeant Johnson dropped the rocket launcher and grinned.

"Ever since I saw the Chief do this, I've always wanted to try it" he said, leaping out the back hatch of the Pelican. Miranda gasped, thinking he had fallen. Instead, the third Banshee rose into view, with Johnson straddling the top of it! He flashed a thumbs up at Miranda as he hauled the cockpit canopy open, threw out the Flood Combat form within, and hopped in, sealing the cockpit behind him. The Banshee fell into escort formation with the Pelican. The back ramp closed as the Pelican entered outer space.

The Sergeant had been planning that little stunt all along; that was the reason for taking the breath mask! Miranda chuckled at the Sergeant's ingenuity as the Pelican floated into the Pious Inquisitioner's docking bay.

An Elite ran up to the lead dropship and whispered something urgent to the Arbiter. The Arbiter looked at the Elite, and growled in his native tongue before stalking over to Miranda. Sergeant Johnson fell in behind her, after exiting his Banshee. A massive grin adorned his face as he held his breath mask; he was obviously very happy.

"Humans. Come with me. There's been a new development on that warrior with the thing on his face" the Arbiter reported.

"Why? What is it?" Keyes asked.

"The thing is gone. He's in med bay now; we must go see him" the Arbiter said. Keyes felt an odd feeling of premonition in her gut—something was wrong, very wrong, with the entire thing, but Keyes shrugged, decided it was merely stress, and followed the Arbiter as he stalked out of the docking bay.

9. Dead or Alive?

Chapter IX

Dead or Alive?

James slowly rotated in the vacuum of space, drifting slowly past the remains of their Pelican dropship. Their warhorse that was supposed to ferry them to the Covenant Homeworld was now mauled, ruined, its engines crushed. The C-12 explosives were still embedded on the craft's nose, however. James knew that they might still have a use for the massive explosives, primarily to destroy that unsecured database within this ship.

"Blue-two, police those explosives," John said. James nodded and pushed himself off towards the nose of the Pelican, puffing his small thruster pack to send him towards the deadly cache of explosive.

Explosions sounded in the background as the Covenant fleet orbiting Reach attacked the UNSC defenders. The Covenant had found Reach, humanity's last stronghold before Earth. As James quickly worked to detach the package from the nose of the Pelican, he wondered just how the Covenant had found them. Perhaps blind luck? He doubted it. None of the UNSC would have cracked, even under interrogation.

Did the Covenant invasion here, at Reach, have anything to do with that odd crystal on Sigma Octanus?

Four loud booms accompanied four long trails of smoke into space. Glancing up, James saw Linda firing her sniper rifle at some odd, floating menace. They looked like men in thruster packs—no, not men. Monsters. Elongated heads, four mandibles, and cobalt-blue armor defined these angry-looking beasts. The one Linda targeted took four shots to the head before finally stopping dead in space. The others turned, snarled, and fired.

"Take cover!" John yelled. Plasma bolts and crystalline needles boiled through the vacuum, bouncing off of the SPARTAN's shields.

James tugged; the explosives were almost free.

Suddenly, a loud thump, accompanied by a sudden jerk, into the void of space, sent James tumbling. One of those creatures must have scored a lucky hit, because James' jetpack was out of control. Straining to re-orient himself, James struggled with the pack's controls, to no avail. The pack was leaking fluid, spraying it everywhere. Without control of the pack, James would continue spinning in space, like a massive gyroscope, until he died. And still, his body would continue to spin, nothing to stop it.

"Blue-two! Come in!" John yelled frantically. James cursed and tried to open a COM channel back to him.

" I can't control my pack anymore, Chief! Get out of here! Those creatures, they're everywhere!" James yelled, as he sped past a group of those creatures, dubbed "Elites" by Dr. Halsey. One of them paused to point at him as he tumbled past, and two bolts of plasma boiled past his head. Potshots.

"Your destruction is the will of the gods. And we are their instrument". The one, taunting message the Covenant had send the UNSC at Harvest bubbled to the surface of James' thoughts; the things were going to take Reach. They were all doomed. And if the Covenant captured the NAV database, they would find Earth. The end of humanity was nigh. And James could do nothing to stop it.

Suddenly, as James spun uncontrollably through space, his spin began to slow, and eventually stop. A familiar feeling filled his gut; the sensation of gravity. Something was pulling him in. A UNSC ship, perhaps? Was it the Pillar of Autumn?

No. James knew it could not be the Autumn. It was another ship. Twisting in space, James was awed by what he saw.

It was some kind of alien ship. Unlike anything James had ever seen before, this ship glowed with an iridescent orange glow. A small hatch on the side opened to admit James, and he floated into the ship's hold.

"Come, human. Events have been set into motion, and we will need your help to unravel this rapid turn of events. This invasion has been foretold, and now, only two can stop the tide from turning," growled a heavily synthesized voice. It resounded and sounded clearly artificial. James looked around, slowly rising to his feet.

"Where am I?" he asked. A shimmer on his left side growled;

"Questions later, human. For now, you will come with us. There is much to be said, and much more to be done," it growled. James suddenly felt pressure on the back of his neck; the last thing he saw was a massive, hulking, meter-tall creature standing before him, before his world melted into darkness.

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Ellen Ripley slowly paced around the LZ, checking and rechecking her weapon. An antiquated weapon, the M41A Pulse Rifle, it had been the weapon of choice by the UNSC forces centuries ago, and she had been surprised to find a serviceable specimen. This one Ripley had found on the black market. The place had had thousands of weapons, ranging from the Pulse Rifles, to the old UNSC squad-based machine gun, the "Smartgun" as it was nicknamed by the marines at the time. Ripley had settled for the Pulse Rifle, though. She would, however, have preferred grenades instead of the shotgun shells on her bandolier, but, beggars could not be choosers.

The Marines had arrived just a little while ago, telling them that their SPARTAN leaders had gone off to investigate some odd hole. Ripley didn't like it; maybe it was a Xenomorph nest? Had the aliens gotten victims yet? Suddenly, Ripley was almost thrown off balance by a massive explosion. It came several blocks away, and the shockwave sent Marines scrambling for cover. It had come from the direction the Master Chief had gone.

The other SPARTAN, Linda, instantly dropped into a crouch, her sniper rifle at the ready. Glancing around, the area was still clear. What was that explosion?

Ripley didn't like it at all; checking to see if her rifle was set to full-automatic fire, she held it at the ready, finger hovering over the trigger.

And to Ripley's horror, a sound she had never hoped to hear again echoed through the deathly silent alleyways and corridors of New Mombassa, Kenya. A loud screech, like a combination angry cat/wild plains animal. Ripley knew that sound; it was the call of the Xenomorphs. The call they made when they had their enemy on the run.

The sounds of fighting grew closer. Gunfire punctured the air; the aggravated screeches of the Aliens and the unmistakable booming of a fragmentation grenade resounded through Ripley's ears.

A shadow, followed by a massive set of green boots, emerged from the darkness of an alleyway. It was the Master Chief; his armor was battered and scratched in some places, and he was quickly reloading his Battle Rifle. Snapping on his flashlight, he fired a burst of shots into the alleyway. Nothing. If there were Aliens hiding, they were certainly doing a very good job of it.

"John! What happened to Fred?" Linda asked. John shook his head.

"Dead. Those creatures got to him, and he used his last grenade on them—and himself" John reported. Linda and John glanced at each other. Ripley knew that this brought the total number of SPARTAN's down to four; John, Linda, Kelly, and Will. The two new SPARTAN III's, Luke and Rebecca, didn't truly count.

"Let's move out. I don't think Kelly and Will have touched down yet. We have to get to the center of the Covenant operations here" John said. Worryingly glancing into the shadows, Ripley followed the

SPARTAN warriors as they snaked through the various twists and turns of the ruined metropolis.

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Crouching above them, unseen, a low shadow watched as the humans pressed onwards, towards the site where the Great Hunt had begun, those many millennia ago. Nothing betrayed the presence of this Yajuta warrior as he followed his prey. They would find and become food for the Holy Warriors. And then, the Final Hunt would begin; the extermination of either species. The final ships of Yajuta were on their way to the world of the heretics as this Yajuta stalked his prey; his brethren would help in the final hunt.

There was only one obstacle. Nay, three obstacles. The Ancients. The three Ancients, sealed away in their respective caskets after the end of the unsuccessful Great Hunt. They were dead, or at least sealed away, claimed legend. They were no more than myth, specters.

But this Yajuta scout had seen it. Aboard the human ship, the first of the Ancients had been slain by the human warrior calling itself the "Master Chief". Two more Ancients remained, aboard their ship. The ship was still in orbit, mingling with the debris of the battle, adrift. It was too much to hope that the Ancients were killed by the Covenant forces; their soldiers could not last against the Ancients, no matter how powerful they were or how many there were.

Leaping from rooftop to rooftop, the Yajuta followed its prey. They were close now, very close to the hive. Using his hunting mask to distinguish between humans, Aliens, and fellow Yajuta, the Alien nest was directly below the humans as they neared the center of the city. The scout could see the aliens pacing back and forth, moving eggs into various chambers, where captured humans and Covenant alike were strapped to the walls, awaiting the moment when the Alien would burst from their chests.

The humans had reached the site now. Chuckling in his own guttural tongue, the scout crouched on a rooftop and checked his weapons. His spear, disc, wristblades, and Plasma Caster were all in place. He was ready. Now all he had to do was wait until the Aliens had claimed the humans, and for the rest of his clan to show up in their ships. Smiling as only a Yajuta could, the scout continued to follow his quarry.

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John took point, striding past the wreckage of a Covenant Plasma Mortar. It lay half buried in debris, obviously from Regret's desperate escape to Delta Halo. An entire city block was missing, pulled with In Amber Clad when it had followed the Covenant cruiser into Slipspace. The Chief shook his head; civilian bodies littered the alleyways, crushed by debris or burned by plasma, courtesy of the Covenant. There were even some radiation-scarred corpses, obviously fried when Regret escaped. The Chief seethed; he promised to make up for every death caused by the Covenant crusade, from the beginning, at Harvest, to here, now, at Earth. Reach, Halo, Delta Halo, Mombassa, Sigma Octavus, the souls of millions of human lives, sacrificed for some holy crusade by a technologically superior group of aliens. The Chief knew that even if he was the last human left standing, he would continue to fight until the Covenant had been

stopped. Then he could finally rest, in peace.

"Chief? Is that you? It's us, Kelly and Will" called a voice and a NAV icon on John's HUD. Linda had seen it too; she pivoted and turned, spotting a Pelican in the distance. Something seemed suspicious; why was the Pelican down? Where were the Marines?

"We're here, Chief. Please, come to us! We've found something, inside this hole, down here!" Kelly, one of John's best friends, called. Linda slowly shook her head, crouched down, and suddenly screamed;

"NO, John. It's a trap; can't you sense it?" she snarled, snapping her sniper rifle up into firing position. John looked at Linda in confusion; what was wrong with her? Kelly and Will were down there, and they needed help.

"Please, Chief, hurry!" called a voice in the back of John's mind. He could have sworn that the voice belonged to Cortana, but, shrugged it off as stress; Cortana was still in the Covenant home station, High Charity, over Delta Halo. The Chief ignored Linda and charged forward, towards the massive, gaping hole in the ground. Remnants of Covenant drilling equipment lay scattered, like children's toys, around the perimeter of the hole.

"Don't let me die again, John," moaned a new voice. John gasped; it was Sam, SPARTAN -034. He had died shortly after being united with his MJOLNIR armor, decades ago, staying behind on a Covenant cruiser to make sure the bombs he had planted would explode on time. Sam and Kelly had been John's best friends during Basic training on Reach.

"Help me, John. You were our leader. Why did you let us down?" a childish voice called, but John recognized it nevertheless. It was Fhajad, one of the SPARTANS crippled by the augmentation process done to them decades before.

"You let me die. You could have saved me". James. Killed over Reach, before the discovery of Halo.

"You went rouge, son. You let me be captured by the Flood, and there can be no forgiveness for that". Captain Keyes, absorbed by the Flood on Installation 04.

"Your precious doctor made me give my life to save yours. Does that make you happy, Chief?" Corporal Locklear, killed during the escape from Halo.

Thousands of soldiers and fellow warriors John had fought with suddenly emerged from the massive hole in the ground. On point were Sam, Kelly, Will, and the rest of his fellow SPARTANS that had died during the bloody conflicts with the Covenant. They all looked dead; Fhajad was crippled, like the last time John had seen him. He was lying on the ground, dragging himself forwards with his arms, an expression of anger frozen on his face. Sam was missing half of his face; the rest of his body was twisted with rage. Kelly had a massive hole punched in her chest. John felt a surge of guilt; Kelly would not have died if he hadn't stopped Dr. Halsey before she left for that planet, and infected Kelly. Will was missing his left arm and part of his left leg, burned away by plasma. Various soldiers, with

wounds varying from plasma burns, to total dismemberment, slowly advanced towards John, all screaming in anger, the betrayals the Chief had caused during the four decades of combat service. John recognized some of them; Private Chipps Dubbo, killed on Halo. Private Mendoza, infected by the Flood. Even Sergeant Johnson and Miranda Keyes marched, all enraged. Their fingers almost looked like claws, and their teeth fangs.

And four wonderful sounds, the cracking of a sniper rifle, broke this illusion. Kelly, Will, Sam and Fhadjad all fell, drilled by Linda's rifle. Suddenly, the images of his comrades melted away, to reveal the hissing, snarling horde of Xenomorphs, advancing in a huge column. The bodies of his fellow SPARTANS melted, and turned into four fallen Xenomorphs.

The Chief stared at them, unwilling to believe what had happened. Even as Linda fired round after round of sniper shots into their midst, and as the Marines fired their weapons, desperately trying to stem the tide of advancing, hissing, black death. As the hellish nightmare began to unfold around the Chief, he stood stock still, staring at the corpses of the fallen Aliens.

What was that?

Shaking his head, the Chief rose, and fired his rifle at the advancing creatures. Priming a grenade, he chucked it into the sea of obsidian. The loud thump of the grenade sprayed green acid everywhere, showering the sea in hissing, steaming columns of smoke. The air reeked of ozone.

Ripley suddenly charged ahead of John, firing her rifle indiscriminately. Aliens exploded and thrashed, slowly melting into pools of acid blood. More Aliens charged, only to get shredded to pieces by the shotgun mounted under her rifle's barrel. The Marines and Linda laid down a hellish cross-fire, quickly and effectively slaughtering the Xenomorph horde.

Finally, the assault was over. The humans had won; barely. Marines grunted as they checked their ammo pouches; completely empty. There were only three Marines with loaded weapons, and even these were half-full. Ripley's bandolier was torn and tattered, the result of frantic scrabbling for her shotgun shells during the battle. Her rifle had jammed some time ago, and another marine had offered to un-jam it, an offer she had agreed to.

The Chief was still shaken by the illusion of his comrades. How did the Aliens accomplish this feat? Maybe telepathy, but the Chief did not believe in such things.

The NAV marker was still on the Chief's HUD. It had stayed there during the course of the battle; the things could fool his mind, but not his machinery. Opening his COM frequency, John whistled a six sing-song tune.

"Oly oly oxen free. We're in the free. All in the free" he muttered. No response. John tried again; still no luck. Either Kelly and Will were hiding, or were dead.

No. They weren't dead. Even though he knew it wasn't true, Dr. Halsey's words came back to John, the propaganda and lies the UNSC

had spread to promote hope for humanity.

SPARTANS never die.

Sprinting over to the downed Pelican, it was only then that the Chief saw the bodies.

Dozens of Marine bodies lay scattered, broken and shattered. Bloody trails indicated that the Aliens had intended to use these fallen Marines as incubators, until the Chief and his team had interrupted them. Noting that none of the Marines were dead, the Chief walked over to one soldier, who was slowly sitting up.

"Wh-wh-what? Sergeant? Is that you?" he asked, dazed. His eyes rolled in his head. A massive bruise adorned his forehead, and he still clutched a Shotgun in a death grip.

"Easy, son. What happened here?" the Chief asked. The marine groaned.

"Hell, sir. Those things came out, masquerading as our loved onesâ€¦|Simmons and Blake bought it first. They ran out, screaming about their long lost family, before they were torn to pieces. I saw my brother turn into one of those creatures, before it got me. I took some of the little bastards down, but there were too manyâ€¦|one got me from behind, I think" he said.

"What happened to Will? And Kelly?" the Chief asked. The marine shrugged.

"I don't know. They got out of the dropship with us, said something about 'contacts', and were still fighting when I got hit. I'm sorry, sir; I don't know" the marine groaned before he fainted again.

The Chief cursed. His comrades could already be bug food. He had to get to them.

"Did you get anything?" Linda asked. John shook his head.

"I don't know. I think they're somewhere down in that hive. We have to get to them" the Chief said. Linda nodded.

"I've got your back, Chief" she said, reloading her Sniper Rifle. Three marines, including Ripley, jogged up to the two SPARTANS as they advanced towards the hole.

"Wait. We're going, too" the lead Marine said. The Chief knew this one; the one who had saved him from the Demon.

"You aren't going. You could get killed" the Chief said.

"And so could you" Ripley retorted. Her face was set, determined. The Chief knew her past and determination to stop the Aliens.

"Ok. But you three, get going" Linda said, motioning towards the other Marines.

"You're gonna need help down there, like it or not, _sir_" a marine chimed in.

"What's your name?" the Chief asked the first marine. She snapped to attention and replied;

"Lieutenant Anna Cameron, sir!" she said. The Chief grinned under his helmet.

"Welcome aboard, Anna" he said, sliding a new clip into his Battle Rifle as he descended into the darkness.

10. The Beginning of the End?

****Chapter X:****

****The Beginning of the End?****

"How are you feeling, noble warrior?" the Arbiter asked, leaning over the stunned Elite. It groaned and sat up, shaking its long, angular head in confusion.

"I'm feeling somethingâ€¦odd. I'm not sure, Arbiter, but I can feel something...like it's inside of me, watching. It's probably just..." the warrior muttered in confusion. The Arbiter arched an eye- Elites did not reproduce sexually, like humans did. The way Elites reproduced was much more efficient, effectively bolstering their numbers in half the time humans did.

"Prepare him to be scanned. Yes, human?" the Arbiter looked at an actually flustered Sergeant Johnson.

"What? You meanâ€¦you guys don'tâ€¦?" the Sergeant asked, putting a hand behind his head. The Arbiter glared at him, sighed at the human's ignorance, and told him,

"If you are wondering about the reproductive abilities of my race, human, allow me to educate you. Elites are more like the creatures you call 'lizards' in your language. Our breeder caste is comprised of the Elites that lay eggs of our species. The warrior castes then fertilize the eggs, which eventually hatch into either more of the breeder caste or into warriors. The general life span of a warrior is, in your primitive measure of time, over one hundred sixty-five of your years," the Arbiter narrated. Johnson looked at the Elite, mouth agape.

"Whoa. That's a lot to wrap your mind around. So, you're saying that you guys don't actuallyâ€¦you know, have it, like us?" Johnson asked sheepishly. For once, the marine was quiet.

"Did you not hear me the first time, human? Now, before you start asking about the reproductive abilities of the Unggoy and Jiralhanea, we must prepare for the transition into Slipspace. Come with me to the bridge" the Arbiter growled, gesturing towards Johnson and Miranda. The Arbiter repressed the urge to shudder at the thought of the Jiralhanea mating ceremonies. The Arbiter had the misfortune of witnessing one of them firsthand, many units ago. The ceremony had beenâ€¦interesting, to say the least. The Elite on the cot tried to stand, but the Arbiter waved his hand at the warrior.

"No, warrior. You are to stay here until I return. Make sure he does not leave," the Arbiter instructed the four white Medical Grunts

hovering over him. They nodded, and proceeded to push the Elite down. The Arbiter felt uneasy with the warrior's complaint- something just didn't sit right in his gut. Something was amiss. The Arbiter shook his head as he marched out of the room. Enough for now; he had a task to accomplish.

"So, do you think we'll be in time to stop Truth?" Miranda asked the Arbiter. The Arbiter sighed, and looked the human in the eyes before honestly replying;

"I do not think so, human. The ship he used, somehow, is much more advanced than any ship in our fleet. There is no way we will beat him to your home planet- the jump may have only taken minutes, from the calculations of the Engineers who had served aboard the massive artifact. We may already be too late; Truth may have already reached the Arc by now" the Arbiter said grimly. Miranda sighed and shook her head. All of this work, for nothing. The sacrifice of her crew, her responsibility, and her ship, all for nothing. She sighed and marched silently to the bridge of the Covenant cruiser.

"Ah, mighty Arbiter. We saw your progress on our charts. The stunt the human pulledâ€|one of bravery, yes? Almost enough to be worthy of a Sanghelli" commented an Elite Zealot on the bridge. The Arbiter grunted and stepped towards the navigation console. The Elite there turned to him and growled;

"Arbiter, Slipspace generators charged and ready, per your orders. Shall we jump now?" the pilot asked. The Arbiter nodded.

"There is no reason to linger here. Fire the generators"

A low hum penetrated the decks of the cruiser, the engines brimming with energy. In a split second, the massive slipspace generators had charged to maximum capacity. They discharged their energy a second later, propelling the ship forwards and opening a hole into another dimension, known as slipspace. The ship disappeared from Threshold in a bright flash of light.

The Arbiter didn't relax just yet- he had seen horrible things happen to ships whose slipspace calculations had been so much as a decimal off what they should have been. Waiting for half a standard unit, he spoke up,

"Status report"

The Elite pilot turned.

"We have successfully entered the slipstream, Arbiter. We will reach the human homeworld shortly" the Elite stated. The Arbiter relaxed, slightly. He could never get at ease aboard slipspace bound ships- his field was the field of battle, engaging the enemy on his terms, not on a chance that your ship would disintegrate halfway towards it's intended target.

"So?" Johnson asked as the Arbiter stepped down from the bridge. The Arbiter looked at him and said,

"We are on our way to Earth. We will be there inâ€|fiveâ€|of your 'hours'" the Arbiter growled. Keyes' eyes widened.

"Five hours? Earth is a week away from these coordinates!"

The Arbiter parted his mandibles, the grin of the Elites.

"In your ships, yes"

Miranda almost pouted as the Elite smirked at her. Catching the childhood reflex, Miranda challenged;

"Is that so," a smile playing across her face. The Elite shook his head.

"Yes, human. Our ships are equipped with the remnants of Forerunner technology; our ships can travel as fast, if not faster, than your ships. And, as you are all probably aware of now, our ships have plasma shielding to protect from various combat wounds. Andâ€¦"

The Arbiter and Miranda began to walk off of the bridge, bickering about the capabilities of the various human and Covenant starships. Sergeant Johnson cocked an eyebrow at the technological crap that was spewing from her mouth and his mandibles, and turned the other way, towards the crew quarters, and the makeshift area designated for human use.

Rounding the corner, Johnson jumped as he ran right into a Covenant Elite! Instinct taking over, Johnson rolled backwards, drawing his pistol. The Elite brought his legs up into a backflip and drew his Plasma Rifle. Both crouched in combat stances, aiming weapons at each other. Johnson realized what he had almost done, and lowered his weapon.

"Sorry, squiddy. Still not too accustomed to this truce yet" he barked. The Elite holstered his weapon and huffed at Johnson before brushing past him. Johnson indignantly shouted at the back of the retreating Elite;

"Well, I'm sorry too, squid-head! Feel lucky I've spared you, because you're too ugly to let live!" he mocked. The Elite turned, snarled, baring his hands like claws. They twitched towards his belt, where a quartet of Plasma Grenades awaited use. The Elite thought better of it, and turned and left. Johnson shook his head and continued towards the Marine quarters.

Johnson, however, did not realize that the Elite he had almost shot was the same Elite from medbay. As Johnson continued down the hallway, muttering obscenities, the Elite twitched. Johnson ignored it- it was probably giving him the Elite version of the finger or something. But when the warrior howled in pain, however, Johnson spun around, surprised.

"Listen, squiddyâ€¦" Johnson began, before staring in surprise at the Elite. The Elite had fallen to the deck, writhing and thrashing in pain. Johnson raised an eyebrow as a fire team of Marines jogged up to his position. Only two of the six marines were armed, and only with the standard issue M6C Magnum sidearms. Two of the marines Johnson recognized as both Stacker brothers. Three brothers in the military, all looking very much alike and acting like clones of each other. They warily regarded the Elite in the corridor.

"Ummâ€¦what's it doing?" the older brother asked. The other

shrugged.

"Whatever it is, I'm not going to wait and find out," another Marine, this one another Halo survivor, growled as he drew his Magnum, holding it at the ready.

The Elite, sensing it was about to die, gave one final, long, warbling wail before it slumped to the ground, dead. Johnson eyed the Elite carefully. It appeared dead.

A low hissing noise, almost like that of acid burning through metal, resonated through the empty chamber. By this time, Miranda, the Arbiter, and the white Elite from Delta Halo had arrived on the scene. The white Elite looked at the dead Elite and snarled,

"Humans! I knew we could not trust them!", drawing his Energy Sword with a flourish. The blade snapped and crackled, casting an eerie blue glow about the corridor. The Marines drew their weapons and pointed them at the Elite, who roared out a challenge in his own guttural tongue. Miranda and the Arbiter stepped forward, holding up their arms.

"NO! We do not wish to do battle, humans! Lay down your weapon," the Arbiter snarled to the white Elite. It bowed its head respectfully and deactivated the Energy Sword. Miranda and Johnson waved at the marines, who lowered their weapons.

"Alright, everyone. Let's just calm down, now!" Miranda consoled soothingly. She tried to smile, but the acrid smell in the air was getting worse. It smelled like stomach acid, almost like vomit. The Arbiter's eyes widened in terror, and he suddenly grabbed Miranda. Miranda squeaked in surprise as the Arbiter flung her behind Johnson, and he himself drew his personal Carbine and aimed it at the dead Elite.

"Run, humans! This warrior is!"

The Arbiter never finished in time. A small plume of smoke rose from the dead Elite's chest as something burned its way through the warrior's armor. The Arbiter fired shot after shot at the burning hole, to no avail. The Elite's chest spiked outwards, at an impossible angle, before finally bursting open.

Johnson had never seen anything like the creature inside the Elite's chest. The way it had burst out, like a parody of a person jumping out of a birthday cake, was almost impossible. And yet, it right in front of him, sitting in a pool of blood. The entrails of the Elite were burst outwards from the hole, painting a gruesome scene on the walls of the cruiser.

Beady black eyes, razor sharp fangs, and skin like a snake composed the hideous creature before them. The creature was doused in purple blood, which glistened in the iridescent glow of the cruiser. By now, a small crowd of Grunts and Elites had arrived on scene, and were glancing at the hideous creature.

Glaring in contempt at these new threats and assessing them in turn, the creature parted its lips to reveal the rows of shining sharp teeth. Emitting a high pitched, almost bestial roar, it shot out of

the Elite's chest with surprising force, and blasted into a service duct used by Engineers before anything could stop it.

"After it, warriors!" the white Elite growled. A pair of Elites grunted and pursued the creature into darkness. The Arbiter shook his head at the fallen Elite and growled,

"Return to your bunks, humans. We will call you to a counsel as soon as we assess the situation at hand" And with that, the Arbiter turned and left, a pair of Elites and an escort of Grunts following directly behind them. Johnson slowly recovered from his shock and stood up slowly. Miranda didn't move, her eyes never leaving the fleshy remains of the dead Elite.

"Oh my god. What was that thing?" she finally moaned. Johnson extended a hand to help her up. She ignored it and stood up.

"A little birthday surprise, more like. Little bastard's got teeth," the second Stacker brother muttered. The first nodded in agreement. The Navy tech that had accompanied them wore an expression of horror on her face; Johnson remembered that Halo had probably been her first combat experience, and the sight of the little surprise just now must be too much. Johnson grunted; Marines like that usually didn't last all that long. The Navy people always were a bit squeamish.

"Let's go. Wait until those squid-heads finish their 'counsel', and we'll see. There's only one of those things- how hard can it be to track it?" Johnson rhetorically muttered to himself as he accompanied Miranda towards the human bunks. Little did Johnson know how wrong he could be with his ill-said statement.

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11. Infestation

Chapter XI

Infestation

The Master Chief slogged through the slime and resin of the underground caverns. From the lights and grafitti showing through the black, stiff resin of the hive, the tunnel had once been some kind of sewer, and maybe a hangout for some local drug addicts. From the gore and slime splattered all over the walls, the fate of these people in the tunnel had been painful and gory after the Covenant had uncovered the secret hidden under New Mombassa.

"Hot damn, is it ever hot in here!" one marine mumbled. The other nudged him in the ribs and retorted;

"Yeah, man. But it's a dry heat, 'ya know?"

"Shut up!" Linda snarled. John arched an eyebrow at her from under his helmet; Linda had been tense, on edge, ever since the Pelicans had dropped them off in New Mombassa. Linda was usually quiet and kept to herself; now, she was lashing out at John and the Marines. If he could guess, John would pass the oddities in Linda's personality off as stress, but after the previous topside vision, John wasn't so sure. Something evil lurked inside these tunnels, something with the

power to influence minds and possibly will and morale of soldiers. What else waited in this hellhole of a pit?

"Sir! I think you had better check this out!" came the voice of a marine. A NAV marker appeared on John's HUD, and he sprinted to the marine's location. Ripley was bending over what looked like a big, leathery sac as John almost tripped over the marine.

"Sir! I thought you might want to see this!" he said, handing John a round object, covered in slime. Wiping the object clean, a familiar green tint gleamed in the semi-darkness. John could have broken down and cried right there; it was a SPARTAN helmet. A trio of long scratch marks were engraved on the side of the helmet, like claws trying to tear the helmet off during a frantic battle. John realized that shell casings littered the floor. Lots of them. Whatever had happened down here had been fierce and drawn out, based on the number of shell casings. Will and Kelly had been here, all right.

"They can't be far. We may just be able to get to them in time!" John growled, running deeper into the hive. Ripley stood, awed by the SPARTAN's sense of leadership, and followed the green, meter tall warrior into the darkness. Linda and the others fell in quickly, tightening their formation.

"Sir, this is Corporal O'Donnell! We've spotted more of those creatures, heading into the hive! They'll be on top of you soon, sir! Advise you evacuate ASAP!" the corporal shouted. John clicked off his COM and grimly said,

"Let's go".

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Anna Cameron glanced warily around the hive, taking in all of the horrifying sights of the alien nest. On some other planet, this would be considered routine duty, nothing special really. The sewer looked extraterrestrial in origin, yet Anna knew it was still on earth. God damn this job, damn it all! The Covenant, the whole war, everything! Her boyfriend, Lieutenant Andrew Harrison, had been killed on Reach, on board a ship. The reports said that his ship, the Ithaca, had last been seen engaging two Covenant cruisers in a vain attempt to try and draw fire away from the orbital MAC guns. Obviously, this attempt had been a failure, and he was probably dead.

"Hey, look!" another Marine motioned. Anna followed his gaze to hear the sounds of a body being dragged over this resiny-stuff.

"After it!" John commanded, sprinting deeper into this hell-hole. The other SPARTAN, Linda, seemed very much on edge as she followed her comrade into the jaws of hell. Anna sighed and pressed on, gripping her rifle tightly.

"Cover fire!" came the voice of another SPARTAN from deep inside of this nightmare. The pinging of rifle fire and the staccado bursts of automatic weapons fire echoed quite clearly from the depths of the hive, and as Anna followed the Chief deeper and deeper, she was surprised to see two more SPARTANS battling it out with more of those bug-creatures. She knew it was those two new mystery SPARTANS, Spartans who had supposedly been separated from the Chief's squad or something years before.

Instantly, the Chief was in the center of the fray, firing his weapon at anything black and hissing. The Chief's ferocity was commendable; he worked with the speed of a jackrabbit, but the precision of a surgeon, targeting the jaws or the heads of the alien creatures.

The hissing of the alien's blood was the only noise in the chamber as the Chief finally relaxed, jamming a new clip into his smoking rifle.

"Master Chief, sir! The others, they're in deeper, and-" one of the SPARTANS began, but the Chief held up his hand.

"Hold on a moment. Who are you two, anyway? I never remembered any SPARTANS by the names Luke and Rebecca, anyway! You can't be from my team!" the Chief proclaimed. His voice remained level, emotionless. Anna had heard that every SPARTAN had been killed at Reach, trying to defend the orbital MAC guns from the Covenant assault—but, the Chief and this other SPARTAN, Linda, had survived. The other two were also Reach survivors, as well. She shook her head in confusion as the two SPARTANS held up their hands in submission.

"We'll explain topside, Chief. You're not the only one who's lost friends in battle, or made sacrifices—" the first SPARTAN, Anna couldn't tell which, spoke.

"They were my brothers. My sisters. No one can replace them" the Chief growled. Even from behind his helmet and mask, Anna could see that the Chief almost radiated emotion. He visibly bristled, and his iron hands threatened to snap his rifle in half.

"Chief, they're close. We have to hurry. I think those things are dragging them down to the deepest levels of the Hive—" the second one urged.

"What's the Hive?" Anna asked, curiously. She didn't like the sound of it, like a nest of these foul creatures wasn't bad enough!

"The Hive is exactly what it sounds like. Let's go" the SPARTAN said grimly, marching on deeper into the nest. Anna sighed and followed; did these SPARTANS have to be so damn cryptic?

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Fred groaned silently, the dank air seeping into his nose. A small bit of water dripped onto his face—dripped onto his face! Where was his helmet?

Then he remembered the fierce battle that had occurred from deep inside of the hive. Damn covenant bastards. They had set this up, here, on Earth. A hive of these big black bug things.

Dozens of civilian and Marine corpses were strapped to the walls in the chamber. Many were dead, blood splattered all over their faces and chests. Ragged holes had been punched through their chests, and Fred knew that Dr. Halsey's creatures were down here, on Earth.

The distant sounds of gunfire penetrated the room. John and the others—they were coming. But would they make it in time? Fred tried to move his arm to his COM unit, but it was stuck, stuck in the gooey

resin that covered the entire room. He was trapped.

"Will?" he called.

"Fred? Is that you?" he called, seeming miles away.

"John's coming" Fred rasped. The air was dank and hot, and it was getting harder to breathe. Will's response took longer to echo across the chamber this time.

"I know. Don't you hear him? He won't stop. John won't lose" he confidently stated. Fred nodded; John wouldn't give up. No matter what.

One of those bugs appeared in front of Fred. It seemed to size him up for a second before scuttling back into the darkness.

"Oh, god. A SPARTAN?" came a call from the darkness. Fred looked up; a marine was strapped to the wall about six feet away from him. Using his neural interface, Fred merely had to think to turn on the floodlight attached to his shoulder. A young Marine, looking no older than eighteen, was strapped to the wall.

"Sir, we're gonna die. We're all gonna die. There are these crab things, and they jump on your heads. oh god, I can still hear them screaming. Then. then." the young marine babbled. Fred grunted; he could begin to feel the resin giving underneath the powerful servos of his MJOLNIR armor. If he could just get free and reach his shotgun still strapped to his back.

Finally, his hand burst free of the resin binding it in place. He ripped the goop off of his torso and other arm, and burst free of the wall. Grabbing his shotgun and sliding in a shell, he fired at a bug that tried to impede his progress. The body fell over top of a large, tan egg. As Fred panned his floodlight around the chamber, he realized that there were _thousands_ of eggs, lined up in neat rows, all across the chamber.

"Holy.!" the young marine began as he saw all of the eggs. Fred blew the closest egg into tiny bits of flesh and slime with a shotgun shell.

"Will? Where are you?" Fred yelled, using a fragmentation grenade to burn a path through the rows of eggs.

"I'm fine, Fred. I'm here" he said, two feet away from Fred. He turned, relieved to see him alive. He carried his helmet in front of him, almost like a sacrificial offering.

"Will?" he asked. Will smiled, to reveal a set of sharp, shiny teeth. A quartet of legs appeared on the helmet's brim, and helped hoist one of Dr. Halsey's "face huggers" onto the top of the helmet. Without a second thought, Fred fired his shotgun, not caring about hitting Will, or this impostor. The image of Will faded and turned into a black, grinning alien bug, holding a egg in front of it. The hugger was shredded, blown to tiny pieces on the ground.

"Whoa. sir. what was that?" the marine asked as Fred proceeded to cut him free from the resin.

"We'll figure that out if we make it out of this hole. Will, are you alive, or is that really you?" Fred called. No response.

"Fred? It's me, Kelly!" came a SPARTAN voice. Fred shone his light towards the source of the voice; there was no mistaking the sage green armor, strapped to the wall of the Hive.

"Kelly? Are you alright?" Fred asked, rapping his knuckles on the side of Kelly's armor to make sure she wasn't another illusion. She was real.

"Stop fooling around, Fred! Get me down! These things still have Will!" she yelled as Fred cut her free using the Marine's combat knife. The marine held his pistol low, and Kelly wielded an SMG.

"Will?" Fred asked, this time using his COM unit. It crackled.

"Fred, is that you? I'm alive, and in some sort of egg chamber" he trailed off. Fred's face drained of color.

"We're on our way" he said over the COM. A NAV marker appeared, about a half a kilometer away. It was through a winding tunnel of sorts, which spiraled downward.

"Well, we've got our work cut out for us, don't we? Let's go, move like we got a purpose!" Fred rallied the one living marine and Kelly to him before checking the walls for any live victims who weren't impregnated. None were still alive, the gruesome holes a testimony to that fact. Fred and the others pressed on deeper into the hive, only stopping to glance behind them as a loud roar echoed through the Hive.

"She's coming" the marine moaned as a dark shadow, darker than even the Hive itself, rounded the corner

End
file.